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WESTERN

THE KILLER THAT CAME

THIS GRIMMING FAST-GUN FIEND HADN'T COME BACK TO GET HIM,
CONDEEN KNEW THAT. HE'D COME BACK TO GET THE GIRL...
PULSEHAMMERING DRAMA BY **WARREN KUHN**



MANHUNT

RED BUTTE CALLED IT THAT, BUT THE MEN
WEARING THE HUNS KNEW IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN
CALLED A WOMAN HUNT...
LUSTY FEATURE-LENGTH THRILLER BY
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WESTERN

May
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★ ★ BRAND NEW ACTION-PACKED THRILLERS ★ ★

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MANHUNT

by Burt and Budd
Arthur

THE SIGN that hung over the doorway was so sun-faded and weatherbeaten that it couldn't be read unless one stood directly below it and peered up at it. Then one was able to make out the words:

SHERIFF
RED BUTTE COUNTY

A second sign that creaked a bit as it swung on its rusted hooks sus-

LUSTY
FEATURE-LENGTH
THRILLER



Pearsall, propped up on his elbows saw the gunmen flung back.

Red Butte called it a manhunt—but the men wearing the guns knew it should have been called a woman-hunt...

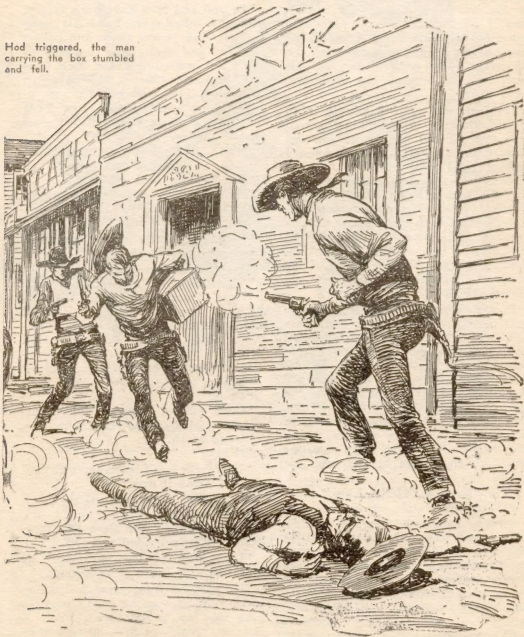
pended from an iron arm that jutted out over the side door, looked new. Closer examination revealed that it wasn't; the letters had been white-edged fairly recently to make it readable at a reasonable distance from it. It said:

UNITED STATES MARSHAL
James J. Pearsall

The side door opened upon a stairway that led to the upper floor of the building.

Hoofbeats drummed downstreet,

Hod triggered, the man carrying the box stumbled and fell.



and the rhythmic beat swelled and carried in the brisk morning air. A horseman came loping up to the sheriff's office, slowed and wheeled into the hitch rail in front of it, swung down and tied up his mount at the rail, and stepped up on the planked walk.

He was a tall man, lean and tanned and grim faced. He wore a silver star pinned to the flap of his shirt pocket. He was Hod Wilks, Red Butte's sheriff for nearly twenty years. He stood on the walk for a moment, his gaze holding on the sign over the doorway, then with a lift of his shoulders, he crossed the walk and went inside.

He came out again a minute later, strode directly to his horse, untied him and climbed up. As he wheeled away from the rail, the door opened and a head was poked out. Lute Hicks, Wilks' slope shouldered, balding and scraggly mustached deputy, watched him ride downstreet, followed him with his eyes till he reached the corner, rounded it and disappeared in a southerly direction. Then, with an unhappy shake of his head, Hicks withdrew his head and closed the door.

It was about two hours later, shortly after ten o'clock, when Jim Pearsall rode into Red Butte, dismounted and tied up his horse at the very same spot at the hitch rail that Wilks' horse had occupied, and trudged weary legged across the walk to the side door. An older man than Wilks, iron grey haired, and about average in height and build, he was unlocking the door to his office when someone came up the stairs behind him. He turned his head.

"Oh," he said. "Hello, Lute."

"H'lo, Jim."

Hicks followed Pearsall inside. There was a sourish, musty smell in the office, and Pearsall went at once to the window that opened on the street and ran it up to its fullest. He hung his hat on a wall peg, unbuckled his gun belt and took it off and hung it up too, walked to his desk and pulled out the chair and slumped down in it.

"Sure is good to be back," he said. "Been living in the saddle almost the

whole seven weeks I've been away. Almost forgot what it was like to sit in a chair. What's on your mind, Lute?"

"Got something for you," Hicks answered.

HE PUT A silver star on the desk. Pearsall glanced at it mechanically, smiled and shook his head, and said:

"So you and Hod have been fussin' with each other again, huh? All right. Tell me what it was about and I'll go see Hod and straighten it out with him." He pushed the star back, gestured and said: "Put it on, Lute. You don't look right without it."

"You don't understand, Jim. That ain't mine." Lute fingered his own pinned on star. "It's Hod's."

"Huh? Hod's?" Pearsall repeated blankly. "What d'you mean it's Hod's? What's the big idea?"

"He told me to give it to you and that's what I'm doing."

"But what's the idea?"

"What's it usu'llly mean, Jim, when a lawman turns in his star?"

The marshal frowned.

"That he's quit," he said curtly.

Hicks' rounded shoulders lifted.

"After twenty years?" Pearsall asked. "It doesn't make sense. Somebody else, maybe. But not Hod Wilks."

Lute shrugged again.

"Where is he?"

"Gone."

"Gone where, doggone it?" Pearsall demanded explosively.

"Gone south."

"When?"

"This morning. Somewheres around eight, I think it was."

"H'm. Hod tell you anything?"

"Like what?"

A blue vein in Jim Pearsall's forehead suddenly bulged and stood out.

"Like why he was quitting!" he hollered, and his face reddened.

"He said he was gonna kill somebody, that because he didn't want to give the law a bad name, havin' a lawman break the law, he was quit-tin' first."

"Wait a minute now," Pearsall commanded, getting up on his feet.

"Kill somebody?" he echoed. "Kill who?"

"Dunno, Jim. Hod didn't say."

The marshal's face was purplish now.

"And you didn't think to ask him, did you?"

"I didn't ask him, no."

"That's what I thought," Pearsall retorted sarcastically.

His tone brought a hurt look into Lute's eyes.

"I wanted to, but knowin' Hod the way I do, I figured that if he'da wanted me to know, he'da told me," he explained in mild protest. "That's why I didn't ask."

Pearsall shook his head a little sadly.

"He said for me to tell you, Jim, that when he's killed the feller he's gone gunning for, that you won't have to go lookin' for him. He'll come back here and turn himself in."

That was too much for the marshal. He exploded. He slung his chair back. It skidded across the floor on its hind legs, struck and caromed off the side wall after chipping a piece of plaster out of it, spun around, toppled over and struck the floor with a crash that made a thin, filmy cloud of dust rise up and billow around the chair. Pearsall darted out from behind the desk, snatched his hat off the wall peg and clapped it on his head, snatched off his gun belt and whipped it around his waist and buckled it on, and headed for the door.

"You ain't goin' after him, are you, Jim?"

"What d'you think?" Pearsall flung at him over his shoulder as he yanked open the door and bolted out.

"He won't like it."

"That'll be too blamed bad!" Pearsall answered as he started down the stairs.

Lute followed him.

"Jim..."

"Yeah?"

"I wouldn't crowd him, if I was you. Hod hasn't been the same since his wife died, and there's no telling how he's liable to act..."

Pearsall stopped with his hand on the knob of the street door. Slowly he turned; slowly too he lifted his

eyes to Lute who had just reached the next to the bottom step.

"Come to think of it, Jim, you wouldn't know about Edie, would you, bein' that it happened while you were away? Kinda forgot for the minute and thought you knew. Happened three weeks ago. Such a pretty girl she was, and so young. Heard somebody say she was ten or maybe fifteen years younger'n Hod. Not that it mattered, of course, or coulda had anything to do with it.

"But that's the way things happen some times. Makes you wonder, y'know? Fine, healthy lookin' girl she was, but sick just one day and dead the next. I never saw anything ever hit anybody any harder than Edie's passin' hit Hod. It was like, we-ll, like the whole world had caved in on him. He hasn't gotten over it yet. That's why I said to you, Jim, not to go crowdin' him and..."

Pearsall didn't give him a chance to finish. He went striding out to the street, untied his horse and swung up into the saddle, backed away from the rail and galloped off.

THERE WERE eight towns, all about the same size and all about the same distance from one another, between Red Butte and Storm River. Parsons came first, then, in order, Church's Crossing, Hodges' Corners, Millettsville, Fawcett, Davistown, Wayside, and last, the town of Storm River.

It was eleven o'clock when Marshal Pearsall rode into Parsons, eleven-twenty when he loped out of it. Sheriff Al Driscoll who knew Hod quite well hadn't seen anything of him that day and was willing to bet that Hod had not been in Parsons. But because Pearsall insisted, Driscoll made the rounds with him, peering into every store and alley until they had completed a circuit of the town. Pearsall was no luckier at Church's Crossing. Hodges' Corners and Millettsville had seen nothing of Hod that morning and Pearsall went on. Sheriff Dave Harwell met the marshal when Pearsall rode into Fawcett, but was sure that Hod hadn't been there. Pearsall accepted Harwell's invitation to have coffee with

him, and that took some time, but it was just as well because it gave Pearsall's mare a chance to blow herself. It was the middle of the afternoon when he reached Davistown and asked the same fruitless questions; the mare was too tired to maintain anything but a trot to Wayside, hence it was sundown when Pearsall wheeled into town and pulled up in front of the sheriff's office. Ten minutes later he was riding southward again.

A frown began to deepen on his face. A question to which he had no ready answer was plaguing him. How much distance, he wondered, had Hod Wilks been able to put between them? When he was wallowing in the mired depths of a fear that it might prove insurmountable, that he might not be able to overtake Hod in time to stop him from completing his mission, a thought came to him that promptly revived his lagging spirits and gave him new hope. Wilks had no way of knowing that he was being pursued, no knowledge that he, Pearsall, had returned to Red Butte and that the marshal was after him. Unaware of that, hence with no reason to suspect that he was being pursued, Hod might not set too swift a pace for himself. Pearsall had to pin his jaded hopes on that.

Storm River was exactly ten miles away. If he failed to find Wilks there, there was only one thing he could do: he would have to stable the mare for the night and go on with a borrowed horse under him. He disliked the idea, but he had a job to do. That was the way it was with law enforcement. It was the most realistic business imaginable. When there was a job to do, there was no avoiding it. A lawman had to face up to it, meet it head on, or as it was in this instance, track it down.

IT WAS NEARLY midnight and Storm River was hushed and darkened save at the very middle of the street where the yellowish lights from the Blue Chip Saloon still burned brightly and played over the walk and reached out to the curb. There were three horses tied up at the rail. Two of them, both wearing the same brand, stood together; the third one,

head bowed, stood apart from them. One of the pair whinnied and waited hopefully for his rider to emerge in answer; when there was no response to his plea, he pawed the ground in a show of impatience and displeasure. His mate joined with him and pawed the ground too. But their riders, standing just inside the doorway, paid no attention to them. The two horses snorted and stamped about; the third one stood motionlessly, still head bowed, and showed no interest in what was going on just beyond him.

About midway down the bar, a full dozen feet from where the other men were talking with the bartender, the third horse's owner, a long, lean figure of a man, was hunched over the bar, toying with an empty, foam ringed beer glass, rolling it between his big hands. After a bit, he put down the glass, pushed it away from him, turned his head and glanced streetward. He jerked around instantly. But it was too late. Jim Pearsall, peering in at that very moment, had spotted him, and now he was crossing the threshold, the men blocking the doorway moving away in order to let him enter.

When Pearsall stopped at his side and his shirt sleeve brushed Wilks' Hod did not move. The marshal grunted, hoisted his right foot atop the scuffed rail and leaned over the bar.

"Why'd you come after me, Jim?"

Wilks asked quietly, without turning.

"Two beers down here, Mac!"

Pearsall called to the bartender. In a sidemouthed undertone he said to Hod: "To stop you from doing something you'll be sorry for the rest of your life."

"When a man's figured things out and he's willing to pay for what he's gonna do, he's the best judge of whether it's worth the price or not."

"That isn't the way I see it," Pearsall said with a shake of his head. "Trouble with that kind of reasoning is this, Hod. When a man works himself up to where he wants to kill somebody, he's past bein' able to judge anything."

"Jim," Wilks said earnestly. "This isn't something that's come to me all of a sudden. I've had the idea for some time now. Only there wasn't

anything I could do about it till now."

"How long you've been playin' with the idea doesn't make any difference, Hod. Who's this feller you're gunning for?"

"You wouldn't know him if I told you."

"Y'mean he doesn't come from around these parts?"

"Nope."

The bartender brought two foaming glasses of beer, set them down in front of Pearsall and Wilks, perhaps a little closer to the marshal than to Hod, removed the latter's empty glass and trudged off with it.

"Jim," Wilks said again, reaching for the glass that Pearsall was pushing toward him and curling his hand around it. "You'd be doin' me a favor if you'd drink your beer and then go on about your business. After I've tended to mine, you won't have to go lookin' for me. I'll head back to Red Butte and turn myself in. That's a promise. What d'you say?"

Their shoulders almost touching and their heads half turned, they were looking at each other now, both with their elbows resting on the lip of the bar, and each with one foot planted on the rail. Each was thinking the same thought: they had known each other for nearly twenty years, yet how well did they really know one another?

Wilks, the marshal admitted, was the best lawman in Pearsall's territory. Hod handled his job so well, there was nothing for Pearsall to do in Red Butte. Hence he spent little time there. They saw each other once every four to seven weeks, when the marshal returned from a swing around his territory. The question he always asked of Hod was: "How are things, Hod?" and the answer was always the same: "All right, Jim. Everything's under control."

IT WASN'T surprising then that they hadn't gotten to know each other too well. Closer association might have led to a better understanding between them, possibly too to a friendship. Now, studying Wilks, Pearsall got a really good look at him. It was almost as though he were seeing Hod for the first time. What

Pearsall had never taken particular notice of before, he was suddenly and surprisingly made aware of. Hod was a good-looking man. Tall, broad shouldered, flat bellied; smooth-skinned, even-featured and steady-eyed.

But there was something in his eyes that made the marshal wonder; there was a cold, steely hardness in them, and he tried to recall if he had noticed it before. If he had, he decided, he'd forgotten about it.

Wilks, meeting Pearsall's appraising eyes, found himself in his turn wondering about the marshal, wondering what he was really like. But because there was something far more important on his mind, and because he wanted to be alone, free to attend to his mission when the time came, he straightened a little and asked:

"What d'you say, Jim?"

Pearsall's head jerked, and he looked at Wilks rather blankly.

"Huh?"

"What d'you say?" Hod asked a second time.

"About what?"

"Is it a deal?"

"'Fraid not, Hod," the marshal replied. "I'm a lawman. Remember? When a lawman knows a feller is out gunning for somebody, it's his job to stop him."

"The only way you can stop me'll be by takin' my gun away from me."

There was no response from Pearsall.

"And you know I won't let you or anybody else take it away from me just like that," Wilks added.

"N-o, I don't suppose you will, Hod."

"Then what's the answer?"

"Haven't got one yet. Drink your beer."

They lifted their glasses together, drained them and set them down again.

"Go another one?" Pearsall asked.

"No, thanks," Wilks answered, and went on gravely: "Y'know, Jim, if you draw on me, I'll just naturally have to go for my gun too. Something's liable to happen. There's liable to be gunplay, and I might kill you. I wouldn't want to do that."

Pearsall offered no reply.

But that was their conversation, the way it went. It was so calm and quiet,

so low-voiced that if there had been somebody standing next to them, he wouldn't have been able to hear it. Anyone watching them leaning over the bar together and toying with their empty glasses would likely have decided they were old friends just having a sociable drink together.

When Wilks pushed his glass away, Pearsall did the same with his; when Hod straightened up, the marshal did too. They stepped back from the bar together and squared around to each other. There was a sudden burst of gunfire outside that shattered the night's silence, a cry that came from a woman and a yell that was man-made. Neither Pearsall nor Wilks moved. It was when a man burst into the saloon and they heard what he blurted out, that they moved. That is, Pearsall moved. He spun completely around.

"The bank," the man panted. "It's been robbed. Two fellers busted into it and a third one's standing guard outside. The sheriff tried to come up behind him and got plugged. He's layin' out in the street. Dead, I think."

THERE WAS a rush for the door, the bartender, the two men with whom he had been talking, and Pearsall, all converged upon it at the same time. The marshal shouldered his way through the other men, and yanked out his gun as he stepped out on the walk. The bank was near the far corner downstreet. There were three horses idling in front of it; on the walk, about midway between the curb and the bank door was a man with a rifle. Someone took a shot at him from a doorway or an alley, and missed. The rifleman fired back. He missed too, but a windowpane shattered and fell in.

Pearsall slanted across the street and leaped up on the far side walk, and ran toward the bank. The man with the rifle saw him coming and raised it. The marshal snapped a shot at him and the bandit took one at Pearsall. The marshal missed. The bandit didn't. His bullet caught Pearsall squarely, staggered him and felled him.

Hod Wilks had come out on the walk. When he saw Pearsall stumble

and fall, he jerked out his gun and dashed across the street. Pearsall, sprawled out on his stomach, heard approaching, running footsteps, and he managed to raise his head and half turn it. He recognized Wilks; when Hod neared him, he hollered:

"Stay out've it, Hod! This isn't any of your business! You aren't a law-man any more! You've quit!"

Wilks didn't answer. Pearsall grinned a little to himself. Hod bounded past him, skidded to a stop some twenty feet away and dove into a doorway. There was gunfire, a swelling, deafening roar of it, with red and yellow flashes stabbing the night light. Pearsall's head was bowed. It was throbbing and he had shut his eyes tight, thinking that that might ease it. When he opened them again and raised his head a second time and looked downstreet, the man with the rifle was gone. There was something sprawled out on the walk in front of the bank. It was a man; Pearsall knew, because it had legs and he saw one of them lift and fall again. Then he spied Wilks. Hod was standing just beyond the fallen bank robber, a little crouched, and waiting. He began to back toward the curb. The three horses standing there shied away from him, wheeled and trotted off.

Gasping for breath and staring wide-eyed, Pearsall saw two men, the one in front carrying a heavy looking box in his arms, come out of the bank. They stopped when they saw Hod, and for just about one single moment everything was hushed and deathly still. There was a sudden clap of thunder. It echoed and carried the length of the street. Pearsall saw the man carrying the box stumble and drop it and sprawl over it. The man behind him and Hod shot it out. Pearsall, propped up on his elbows, saw the man get flung back under the rattling blast of gunfire that Wilks turned loose upon him, saw him spin on buckling, wobbling legs and fall against the front door of the bank, saw him sag and crumple brokenly, sink down and hunch over on his knees, and finally ease forward on his face.

The yell of triumph that formed in the marshal's throat died there; no sound came from him save a choked

off gurgling. His eyes closed and his head bowed again and thumped on the walk. A quiver, a shudder, ran through him, then his body seemed to relax and spread itself. Presently he lay still.

IT WAS MORNING, bright, cheery and sunshiny. But the hotel room in which Jim Pearsall lay was shadedrawn and shadowy, and dark in the far corners. The doctor, a grave faced young man with long sideburns, was bending over Pearsall. There was a light rap on the door, and he came erect, walked to the door, opened it and peered out. Hod Wilks was facing him over the threshold.

"How is he, Doc?" Hod asked in a guarded whisper.

"About the same, Wilks."

"Think I can see him?"

"Y-es, I think so."

The doctor backed with the opening door; he closed it behind Wilks, stood with his back to it and watched Hod tiptoe across the room to the bed and bend over.

"Jim..."

Pearsall opened his eyes.

"Oh," he said in a strangely phlegmy voice. "Hello, Hod."

"Hello, yourself. How d'you feel?"

"I can remember when I felt better," Pearsall answered, and his voice sounded clearer and stronger. "I guess I'll make it, all right."

"'Course you will," Hod assured him.

"What was the windup last night?"

"Last night?" Wilks repeated. "You mean two nights ago."

"What happened to yesterday? Mean I slept it away?"

"Yeah, guess you did. But you didn't miss anything. And the fact that we busted up a bank robbery oughta make you feel better."

"You busted it up. I didn't."

"All right. Let's say the law busted it up. That'll cover both of us."

"Wait a minute now. Since when've you been back on the side of the law?"

"Since the other night."

"What about that feller you were gunning for?"

"That's over with."

"Yeah? How d'you know you won't

get the urge to go after him again?"

"I won't, Jim, because I took care of him the other night too."

"Huh?" Pearsall stared up at him.

"You did? When the other night? Y'mean after that bank business?"

"Maybe it would be better if I told you the whole thing, huh?"

"Yeah," the marshal retorted. "Maybe it would."

"You hear about me losin' my wife, Edie, Jim?"

"Lute told me. Sorry, Hod."

Wilks nodded grimly.

"Happened out've a clear sky. Sick only one day. I felt like the whole world had fallen in on me." Hod paused for a moment, then he went on. "I was going through her things, puttin' them together and bundling them up so that nothing could happen to them. I came across a bunch o' letters addressed to her." He stopped again, moistened his lips with his tongue. "They were from a feller named Herrick. Steve Herrick. He liked his looks so much, he sent along a picture of himself in every letter. Edie evidently met him when she was visiting her sister in Oklahoma. Herrick wanted her to go 'way with him to California."

THERE WAS no comment from Pearsall. His eyes held on Wilks' face.

"Then about a week ago another letter came from Herrick," Hod related. "He was travelling around the country and he was heading this way before he swung around and went back to California. He wanted to take Edie with him. He told her to meet him here in Storm River, right here in the hotel, told her the date and so on."

"He didn't know she was dead."

"No."

"So instead of Edie coming to meet him here, you did."

Wilks nodded.

"It was gonna be some surprise party I'd planned for Mister Herrick. I had it fixed with the hotel clerk. I was to stay put in the saloon across the way and wait. When Herrick showed up, the clerk was to come over and let me know. Well, things didn't work out the way I'd planned them. Not quite, anyway. Jim, those three

mavericks who tried to rob the bank..."

"What about them?"

"He was one of th'm."

"Huh? Who was? This...this Herrick?"

"Uh-huh."

"How d'you know?"

"I'd studied his picture so, the ones he sent to Edie, I coulda picked him out of a crowd. When we were goin' through his clothes, what d'you think we found on him?"

"What?"

"A picture of himself. A mate to the ones he'd sent Edie."

"Find anything else on him? Like a letter that Edie might've sent him?"

Wilks shook his head.

"Then chances are she didn't answer any of his letters. So you got Herrick. Paid him off good. You satisfied now?"

Hod didn't answer. He looked at his big hands, turned them over and studied them for a moment. Then he lifted his eyes. There was bitterness in them.

"No," he said. "I'm not satisfied. But there isn't anything I can do about it because Edie's dead. I never thought she was that kind, Jim. Never thought she was the kind that'd mess around. Guess I had her figured all wrong, maybe right from the start. And I suppose wakin' up to the fact that I helped her make such a fool of me is what's hardest to take."

"I think you're 'way off, Hod."

Wilks looked hard at Pearsall.

"What d'you mean, I'm 'way off?"

"Why didn't Edie go 'way with Herrick? Why didn't she just pull up stakes and walk out on you? Wanna know why she didn't? That is, why I think she didn't? Because she wasn't in love with Herrick, and because all the letters he wrote her didn't mean a thing to her."

Apparently Hod wasn't fully convinced yet, for he asked:

"Then why didn't she tell me about him and about the letters when they started to come? I'da known what to do about them."

"Hod, the way I see it, maybe she didn't want to hurt you, and that was probably what she was afraid would happen if she told you. Maybe she

figured the best thing to do was keep the whole business to herself, that maybe after a while, when Herrick found he wasn't getting anywhere with her, that he'd quit writing. She probably planned to burn all the letters, and that would've been that. She must've put off doing it, or maybe she forgot about them. But then, without any warning, she got sick and died."

"Y'know, Jim, I shoulda figured there was something up a long time ago. All of a sudden, Edie took to doin' her marketing the very first thing in the morning. Sometimes even before I was out of the house. Then, on her way back to the house, if there was any mail for me, she'd stop by the office and drop it off. There was no rush for my mail. The stuff I usually get is so blamed unimportant, it can always keep till I get around to pickin' it up.

"But by pickin' it up herself, all the mail that is, I never knew anything about any mail that she was getting. It was only afterward, after she died, that Dee Hawkins down at Lang's general store where the incomin' mail bag is dropped every night by the westbound stage, brought me that last Herrick letter. That's when he told me about the others."

"I still think you're wrong about her, Hod."

"Jim," Wilks said earnestly, "I'd sure like to believe that. Fact is, I want to believe it."

"Then believe it."

Pearsall lay back now. His eyelids fluttered and closed. The doctor, seeing Wilks peer hard at the marshal, came quickly across the room and bent over him, looked up at Hod and shook his head and motioned for him to go. He followed Wilks to the door.

"I'm afraid that was too much for him," he told Hod.

"Guess I shouldn't have stayed so long. But he looked all right and sounded like he was feeling all right. Then all of a sudden..."

"I know."

"You don't think he'll make it, do you, Doc?"

Their eyes met and held.

"No," the doctor said quietly. "Bullet in the chest. Lung pierced. Bad."

Hod shook his head sadly.

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THE KILLER THAT CAME

by Warren Kuhn

LUKE CONDEEN thrust a tired leg against the loft timbers on either side of him and thrust the pitchfork again into the hay, trying to push the worry from his mind.

His actions were automatic, his arms driving deep to fork bundles of dried straw down into the barn. Below him the hay fell in a growing pile,

May's chickens scattering each time a forkful landed, their cackle rising in the heat. Sweat poured down Condeen's face, the back of his shirt became sodden, but the work, instead of keeping his mind busy as he'd hoped, only released it to entertain a black fantasy of fear.

It's Hines, he thought, and the

This grinning fast-gun fiend hadn't come back to get him, Condeen knew that. He'd come back to get the girl...

Hines raised his gun and aimed at Condeen.



knowledge chilled his wet back. *After five years he's found me and this time he'll finish the job...*

This day had begun like any other, quiet and happy with May bustling in the kitchen, and the hungry, good smell of frying bacon spattering the air. May, with her gentle ways and her brown hair done up tight against her head, was good in a kitchen.

And good as a wife, Condeen reflected. For five years she had brought him contentment and peace. To some men she would have been thin and too soft and maybe a bit too old, the timid eldest daughter of a sodbuster. But to Condeen she was the end of all the lonely trails he'd ridden as a wanted and a hunted man, and he had left the owlhoot to build a ranch and try with May's help to remake his life.

And now Hines had found him. *And not only me*, Condeen thought with a tug of fear. *He's found her too.*

He forked a final mound of hay and rested on the tines a moment, wiping the gritty sweat from his seamed face. After breakfast that morning he'd saddled up and ridden into Rock Springs. He'd needed hardware for the windmill and he'd gone to the saloon for the single drink he always allowed himself in town. It hadn't taken long for the bartender to tell him about the man looking for him.

"A tall, stoop-shouldered, mean sort of hombre, Condeen," the bartender had said, frowning. "With narrow eyes. Allus said a man with narrow eyes is no good."

Condeen had listened, moving his glass in circles on the bar.

"Queer sort, too," the barkeep had continued. "Kept me wetting his neckerchief so's he could mop the side of his head like he had him a big ole drunk that wouldn't go 'way."

Condeen looked up then, his eyes going hard.

"What side of his head?"

"Left side, I think. Yup, kept wettin' the left side, 'bove the ear. Why? You know him?"

And Condeen had shook his head and paid up and walked out into the street. The hot morning sun struck

him on the face and he put a hand against the hitchrail to steady himself. *Wetting his head above the ear.* A man with a drunk, maybe—or one with a broken piece of bone in his skull where a posse bullet had slapped and left it cracked so that the pain never disappeared.

CONDEEN knew then it was Morgan Hines, and the past came back, closing over him with the fury of a flash flood. Ten years ago Condeen had ridden his trails alone, striking a small bank here, an isolated mine office somewhere else. He rode fast and lived fast, but he'd never killed. When they caught him it was that fact alone that saved his neck from the noose and so he grew to know the dark and the damp of prison.

And there he had met Hines, a wise and shrewd man who rode with a gang until the law had found them too. But jail sentences come to an end and when theirs was finished, he and Hines rode together and the jobs got bigger and bigger. And men died, lawmen and others, and slowly Condeen grew older and sicker of it until he had enough.

Only Hines let no man quit. No man—until Condeen did it and slipped away, and because of his leaving bullets had found the others and started the fires of hell burning in Hines' head. And Hines had never forgotten. Now he was back.

Condeen shook his head slowly, his stomach feeling raw and empty and he settled the fork back against the loft wall and climbed down. Around him the horses moved in their stalls, tromping the clean earth, and flies buzzed in the patchwork of sunlight coming through the door. A solitary chicken scratched apart from the others under a loop of old harness and Condeen stopped by the barn door, looking out across the corral and the fences and the fields he'd made from the empty earth.

His hips were bony and his frame was large, the farm work putting muscle on him, but he stood with a slight lean to the side. May had joshed him about that, saying he must have been born with a lead weight in his pocket. *Or a gun slung low in a holster.*

Condeen squinted against the sun. In five years he had worn no weapon and his hips moved free from the weight of a Colt. He had put it up and filled his hands instead with a shovel and a hammer. Condeen raised his hands. They were calloused and thick, the joints stiffened.

You're no match for Hines, now, he thought. And you don't fight a man like Hines with a hammer and a hoe. He thought then of running. They could pack the wagon, let Johnson down the valley look after the stock, say they were going on a trip. To where? To another town, another valley—and wait for Hines to come again?

Condeen let his hands drop. He moved across the yard. His guns were in the house.

AT THE KITCHEN entrance, he stepped over the iron mud-scraper May had made him put there. There were clogs of dirt on his boots from the stable, but his mind was on the dusty loops of his gunbelt in the house. He knew that May would give him heck for tromping stable dirt on her clean floors. Only now it didn't seem to matter much.

Condeen heard his wife working in the kitchen. There was the clink of coffee pot on stove lid and the grate of a poker among coals. She was fixing dinner, he thought, and he opened the door and stepped in.

The kitchen was a wide one, with a door at its other end that opened into the rest of the house. May's big Pittsburgh stove stood against one wall, the sink and pump under the windows and the table set square in the room's center.

But now the table was pushed a bit to one side by the weight of the man's feet. The same feet had left muddy boot tracks along the floor and water dripped from the sopping wet neckerchief the man held to his head.

Condeen stood without moving.

Then he said finally, "I see you got here, Hines."

He watched the thin stranger nod and grin, the grin touching the mouth but not the eyes where the wrinkles of constant pain had left deep marks.

"Always do," Hines said. "One way or another."

Condeen swung to look at his wife and saw May turn from the stove, her face set and white. Her hands were clenched tightly about the coffee-pot handle and as Condeen looked at her, she tipped it slightly and hot brown fluid spilled to the floor.

Hines' chair came down with a bang and his voice snapped an order. "Don't like to see a messy woman," he growled. "Watch that coffee."

Condeen moved to the table, his fingers curling into fists and Hines shifted so his hand lay on his thigh near his gun.

"You still a smart man, Luke?" Hines asked.

Condeen glanced past the man's gun hand toward the door. In the next room was the closet with his own gun, but Hines barred the way. Condeen felt his stomach knot into a rawhide lump.

"I try to be, Hines," he said.

Hines grinned.

"Now that's right intelligent—smart way for a fella' to be, 'specially when he's got a wife."

May came between them then, holding the pot.

"Luke," she demanded. "Who is he? Trackin' in here with his big dirty boots—"

"Yeah, Luke," Hines said. "Who am I?"

Condeen watched them both. Hines coolly smiling, patting his head with his wet kerchief. May holding her temper behind white, indrawn lips.

"He's an old friend of mine, May," Condeen said. He watched Hines closely, and then he said to him, "Let's you and me go outside and talk while May fixes dinner."

Hines eyed him carefully for a moment and got up, holding the wet kerchief in his hand.

"Sure, Luke," Hines said, and to May, "Fix some biscuits. I've really been cravin' some nice, brown biscuits."

They left May white-faced and angry by the stove and went out into the yard, Condeen first, Hines following, his spurs making a faint jingle. Condeen's big farm boots dug into the hard yard dirt as he walked. A man leaves a horse, he thought, and the earth changes him. Your feet go flat

and your legs turn heavy like roots and your knuckles are stiff with work.

AT THE WATER trough, Condeen stopped and turned. Hines stood easily, shifting sideways a bit and he reached out, dipped the kerchief into the mossy water and started to sop his head.

"Doesn't get any better," Hines said, patting his skull. He winced suddenly and then forced his eyes open to keep watch on Condeen. "Sleepin', eatin', lovin'," Hines said flatly, "it never stops. Just keeps hammerin'."

Condeen watched him.

"You're back," Condeen said. "But you'll never do it."

Hines stopped patting his head, the water running down over his forehead and streaking the grime there. His wet hair, plastered down, gave his head a lopsided appearance.

"I'll do it," Hines said. "Five years in that lousy jail gave me time to think how."

He pulled away the wet cloth.

"First your knees," Hines said. "Then your elbows, and your belly." He squeezed the cloth and water streamed into the dirt by his feet. "I was gonna put the last one in your head, but now—"

Hines gave a nod toward the house and Condeen stiffened.

"Not her," Condeen started to say. Hines cut him short.

"No," Hines said, "not in that way. But you'll be out here, bleeding away, and you can listen to her in there." He grinned. "I mean—listen to us."

The heat in the yard was suddenly a searing fire that roared in his eyes and Condeen lunged forward, big hands going for Hines' grinning face. Only Hines was quicker. Like a supple rawhide thong he dodged, his thin body ducking away from the ponderous force coming at him and as Condeen swept past, Hines pulled his gun and drove the barrel across the back of Condeen's head. Condeen sprawled, his knees hitting hard and he lay there, his hands in the mud that Hines' dripping kerchief had made. Hines laughed.

"You old ox," he said. "You're no good in a fight or with a woman. Al-

ways took me to show you how to do things."

Condeen managed to roll over and look up. Hines laughed again and holstered his gun.

"Get up," Hines ordered. "You're gonna play along 'til I'm ready."

Suddenly a grimace tightened his face into a mad fool's mask of pain. Wildly, his eyes rolling, he backed off, one hand on his head, the other on his gunbutt, until he was stopped by the bars of the corral. He hung there, panting.

"Ain't pretty, is it?" he said to Condeen. "Like living with hot coals in your head—and for five years, Luke. Five years!"

CONDEEN got to his feet and stood there dusty and exhausted.

"You done this to me, Luke," Hines went on. His hand shook where he held it against his head. "You had enough, you said, so you rode off and left us. 'Let me go, Hines!' you said. But you didn't go, did you? Not 'til we were in that last bank and you could light out and leave us blind, so we didn't know who or what was comin'."

Hines grimaced.

"An' they came all right, blastin' us clean out of the street—an' leavin' me with this."

His hand pressed his skull.

"But I found you, Luke, and now you're gonna wait and wonder and *think*—and when it comes I'm gonna have fun. Lots of fun."

"You're plain loco," Condeen said then. "But you didn't need a bullet in the head to make you that way."

Hines pulled his hand away and shoved the wet kerchief into his belt.

"Shut up," he said and he nodded toward the house. "We're goin' in and eat some biscuits and you're gonna smile while we do it."

It was well past midnight and Condeen could not sleep, and in the dark May found his shoulder and shook him. He turned, one big arm going around her and her body shivered.

"Send him away, Luke," she said to him. "I don't know why, but he's not good."

Condeen patted her body gently.

"Go to sleep, May."

"Please, Luke, talk to him," she pleaded. "Make him understand. I don't want him here." She held Condeen's face with her hands. They were cold. "I'm afraid of him, Luke. Tell him to get out."

"I can't, May," Condeen said. "It's all right. Go to sleep."

She lay back then, pulling her body away and Condeen sank back into the pillow, staring into the heavy black of the room.

Go to sleep, May, he thought, while your husband lies here and knows what's going to happen. Like mice being played with by a cat—waiting, each hour, each day, wondering when Hines would tire of playing, or feel crazy enough to start in.

CONDEEN brought his rough hands together and rubbed one heavy, calloused palm over the other. There was not even a gun now. Hines had taken them both, the dusty handgun in the closet, the shotgun over the fireplace. Most important Hines had the ace—he played for himself, while for Condeen there was something else, something more important. Death would come like he had seen it come to others and he didn't care, but not to May—not the way Hines had planned for her.

He sat up, shifting his feet quietly out of the bed. May by herself had a chance, if she got away now, off somewhere, out into the brush. Hines wouldn't leave until he had finished with Condeen and May would have the time.

Condeen got up and bent over her, his hand shaking her gently. She came upright, her fingers gripping his arm.

"Don't ask questions," he said. "Get dressed. You're leavin'—now."

She argued, but he forced her clothes onto her and went to the window. Outside, the ranch yard was black and still. The dark bulk of the barn loomed beyond.

"Get to the barn," Condeen whispered. "Take one of the horses. Ride to Johnson's and stay there."

"But you—" she said. "When—"

"I'll come as soon as I get rid of him."

A bit roughly he pushed her out of the window, letting her down cau-

tiously on the dirt outside. He slipped out himself and they crouched by the house. It was dark, utterly silent.

"Now," he whispered and gave her a slight push toward the barn, and she started forward. There was the splutter and hiss of a match and a small splotch of flame broke the darkness several yards away and Condeen heard Hines' insolent voice.

"Mighty dark night for a ride, Condeen."

Hines laughed heavily as he scraped the last of the eggs from his plate.

"'Member ol' Shorty, Luke?" Hines chuckled and stuffed a wad of bread into his mouth. "Now there was a critter that had a way with women."

Condeen said nothing. He could only watch May's gaunt face, her hands drawn tight into her apron, the untouched food before her. Neither of them had eaten while Hines had stuffed himself, talking and joking about the old days.

"Mighty good cookin', May," Hines said and leaned toward her. "Hard to find a good lookin' gal who's a good cook, too." He reached out and stroked her arm. "Yup, mighty hard to find these days."

Her lips white with anger, May stumbled erect and started toward the stove. Hines jumped up and cut her off.

"Now don't be unsociable, May."

Condeen got up.

"That's enough."

Hines looked at him.

"Why, I just wanted May to wet my kerchief, Luke." He grinned. "Here honey, wet it for me."

May took the cloth and doused it at the sink. Hines took it and started to pat his head.

"Thanks, May," he said. "You're right thoughtful."

"I've got to do my chores," Condeen said. "Let's go, Hines."

Hines started to grin and saw Condeen's big body stiffen and his hands go flat on the table.

"All right, Luke," Hines said. "Don't want to rush things, do we? I'm a patient man."

IN THE BARN, Condeen worked doggedly, while his mind sought after answers. Hines leaned back on

an old saddle, wetting his head with his kerchief and smoking, watching Condeen's every move.

"You know, Luke," Hines said, "I'm beginning to like it here. Think I might just stay on."

Condeen jerked a tangle of bridles off a barrel and turned, angrily. Hines came upright quickly, eyes watchful, the grin turned hard on his mouth.

"Don't ask for it, Luke," Hines said.

Condeen focused his attention on the bridles. *No, don't ask for it*, he told himself. Sooner or later Hines will get tired of playing and he'll go to work—his kind of work.

As Condeen's big fingers tugged at the tangled leathers, he looked toward the barn entrance and the rolling land beyond. No other ranch was within miles. He and May were isolated and even the Johnson's rarely came by.

The knotted tangle was an irritation in his hands and with a sudden fury, Condeen gripped and yanked. Bits of torn leather whipped back over his fingers. Hines chuckled behind him and whistled.

"Too bad you won't get to use those hands," Hines said. "But a man don't need to be an ox to pull a trigger."

Luke Condeen didn't turn. A man needed to be only a low and crawling thing to pull a trigger, he thought. Pulling a trigger was easy. Not pulling it was the tough part. Condeen's mind snapped back to the struggle he'd had with himself five years back, vowing never to wear a gunbelt again. He stared at his big, rough hands and looked upwards. Strands of hay hung down from the square loft opening and he reached for the ladder.

He needed time desperately. Down here on the hard-packed earth, Hines was at home. Up there on the yielding hay it might be a different story. Condeen had to take the gamble.

"My stock needs hay," he said. "I'm going up."

Hines hesitated and started after him.

"Any tricks, Luke, and you're dead."

Carefully Condeen went up, climbing out and waiting for Hines to follow. As he stood there in the loft, he

saw the pitchfork by the wall where he had left it. It was a weapon but long yards away. His eyes searched again with a fever. And found a grain sack almost at his feet.

Watching, knowing Hines would shoot at the slightest move, Condeen edged his foot against the sack, getting his instep solidly beneath it. Hines was coming through the opening, his eyes fixed on Condeen.

But the ladder rungs were coarse and uneven. The best trained feet in the world could slip and Hines had the feet of a horseman. One boot slid just a bit and his glance dropped and Condeen sent the heavy sack skidding toward the opening. It struck Hines in the chest, knocking him back, but as he fell, the gunman drew and a bullet slammed off somewhere.

Condeen was turning and going for the pitchfork when Hines shot him through the back of the knee. The pain was a solid blow and Condeen felt himself going down, his hands outstretched, grabbing for the fork. As they hit, man and tines falling on the loft floor, Condeen twisted and saw Hines clutching with slipping fingers to the loft boards with one hand, while with the other he swung his gun around for a third shot.

Only Hines' fingers gave out first and the man disappeared. There was an oath and a cry of pain and then another bullet exploded dust and grain from the floor a foot from Condeen's body. Another shot screamed upward and Condeen lunged on his good leg, pulling the shattered knee after him. With one hand he dragged the fork, the other pulled him over the boards.

Hines fired again, cursing. Something hit Condeen in the thigh, bringing him flat, his eyes going dim. He lay there, shaking, trying to rise and not being able, and he thought of May, and somehow he raised himself on his one good knee, his bloody legs marking the dusty floor and he held himself upright on the tines of the fork, weaving at the edge of the loft.

Hines was below, half-crouched, wet hair dangling, eyes sick with hate. And Hines grinned and raised his gun with a patient care and aimed

(please turn to page 25)

A LONG EVENING

by Donald Bayne Hobart

Old Seth Anders was just as glad that Jed Cart-right did want to kill him....

SETH ANDERS sat in the ranch-house living room, an old man on whom the long, hard years had left their mark. There'd been good times along with the bad, of course. The sixty years that had passed since Anders was a gangling orphan kid of fourteen trying to make out on his first riding job, hadn't been what could rightly be called monotonous. This Texas country was one in which you grew up fast and didn't tarry much about aging either.

The oil lamp sputtered and Seth Anders glanced across the table. Seemed like he never would get used to not seeing Martha sitting there like she'd always done of a quiet evening for the past forty years. Now she was gone, this would be the hard-

est of all winters to face. Martha always had been a wife and mother a man could be right proud about.

Perhaps if the boy had lived, this old place wouldn't be so lonely now. It was hard to know they were both sleeping in their graves back up on the hill beyond the ranch buildings.

Anders glanced toward the door leading out into the hall, his gaze centering on the big man he suddenly realized was standing there, hand on gun.

"You didn't need to sneak in," Anders said without moving from his chair. "I ain't started barring my door to visitors yet and don't figure I ever will, Cartright."

The big man blinked. "So you recognized me right off after fifteen years." His voice was

When Anders was sheriff he had caught Jed working on stolen cattle.



harsh with an old hatred that was always with him. "Maybe you would have double-barred the door if you'd known I was coming here tonight."

"Don't seem likely," Anders said, his smile like a streak of pale sunlight across the edge of a frozen pound. "Sides, you're afraid of me and I'm not of you."

"Afraid of you?" Cartright tried to snarl, but there was an uneasy note in his voice. "What makes you think that?"

"Saw you when you rode in here," Anders said. "That was maybe twenty minutes or a half hour ago. I've been waiting and thinking of other things." The rancher glanced at the empty chair on the other side of the living room table. "You made sure that my crew wasn't in the bunkhouse—that there was no one here but just the two of us."

"And if I did?" Cartright demanded. "Why did that make you figure I'm scared?"

"It didn't," said Anders. "It was the way you sneaked in here with your hand on your gun."

"It don't matter," Cartright said. "There's no need of a lot of talk. I came here to kill you, Anders, and you know why."

"Yes." Seth Anders nodded, the yellow light from the lamp roaming over his thick gray hair. "I know."

His thoughts drifted back fifteen years. It had been his testimony that had sent Jed Cartright to prison as a rustler. He had caught the big man working on stolen cattle with a running iron back in the hills. Seth Anders had been the county sheriff in those days.

Cartright had been a young fool. Trying to start a ranch of his own but too reckless or too impatient to do it with his own breeders. He had to try and steal other men's cattle. It wasn't local stock that he'd rustled. At least Cartright had had sense enough not to try that. Might have got away with it too if Sheriff Anders hadn't caught him dead to rights.

"I've hated you for fifteen years," Cartright said now. "Long days and nights I've dreamed of the time when I'd served my sentence and could find you and kill you, Anders."

"Now you've found me," Anders

said. "And I'm glad."

"Glad!" Cartright stared at him in amazement. "What are you talking about?"

"Sometimes a man gets right tired of living," Seth Anders said. "That's the way I've been feeling lately. Sort of anxious to join my wife and son. They're both dead and it's too lonely in this house."

Cartright walked over and sank down in the chair on the other side of the table.

"You mean you want me to kill you?"

"I'd be right obliged," Anders said dryly. "Though I wouldn't be able to return the favor."

Cartright shook his head. It was quite obvious that the old cowman's attitude was so unexpected it left his visitor dazed.

THE TICKING of the clock on the mantel over the fireplace was a steady insistent sound in the silence. Anders glanced at it and then again fixed his gaze on the face of the big man on the other side of the table.

"I'm seventy-five now, Cartright," Anders said. "Reckon I'm right like that old clock. It still keeps ticking away but it runs down a lot easier than it used to do."

"You're just bluffing, Anders," Cartright snapped, the impatience still with him. "Trying to talk your way out of a tight. Maybe you figure some of your men will be coming back soon."

"They won't be back," Anders said. "I paid them off and let them go this morning. Sold the ranch and stock yesterday. The new owner is coming to take over tomorrow."

"But why?" Cartright demanded. "I've thought a lot of things about you during the fifteen years but I never figured you to be a man who'd just up and quit."

"How old are you, Jed?" Anders asked in the tone of one talking to a friend. "I don't rightly know."

"I'm forty," Cartright said. "I was just twenty-five when you sent me to hell."

"You're still too young to know about the tired years," Anders slowly rose to his feet. "And you are still a fool, Jed. Coming here to kill me

when you know that if you do it will only mean you'll be caught and maybe hung for murder."

"There will be no proof I did it," Cartwright said. "And the law will never catch me again."

He watched Anders, conscious that the old man was not even wearing a gun, yet wary of some trick. Then Cartwright grinned.

"Maybe it's better this way," he said. "Yes, I'm going to enjoy it right much, Anders."

"Enjoy what?" Anders asked.

"Watching you squirm," said Cartwright. "Waiting and wondering. Not knowing when I'm going to kill you or just how."

"It could make for a long evening," Anders said. "When did you eat last, Jed?"

"Huh?" Cartwright looked startled. "Why, this morning in a town over south of here. You got a reason for asking?"

"Sure," said Anders. "Figured if you were hungry I might stir you up some vittles."

"I'm hungry," said Cartwright. "Start stirring."

"Come on out to the kitchen," Anders said. "I—"

There was a sudden crash of glass as a bullet tore through a window pane. The roar of the rifle outside the front of the house was a metallic wail.

Instantly Anders blew out the lamp, plunging the room into darkness.

"What the—" Cartwright muttered.

"Looks like you're not the only one who hates me, Jed." Anders' voice was calm in the blackness. "Funny—I didn't figure I had any enemies left but you."

There came a second shot from the rifle and a bullet thudded into the rear wall of the room.

"The dirty sidewinder," Cartwright growled. "Hanged if I'm gonna wait fifteen years to kill you and then let somebody else do it, Seth."

"Would be a mean trick," said Anders dryly.

There was the click of a door opening as the old cowman got a rifle out of the gun cabinet in one corner of the room.

CARTWRIGHT had edged close to the shattered window, gun in hand as he peered out.

"What are you doing, Seth?" Cartwright asked.

"Getting a rifle," said Anders. "I just thought why that drygulcher might be out there."

"Why?" asked Cartwright.

"Because when I sold the ranch to Matt Lakeland today he insisted upon paying me in cash," said Anders a bit cryptically. "Ten thousand dollars for the property and stock just as it stands."

"And you've got the money here now?" Cartwright asked.

"I sure have." Anders reached the other front window and gently raised the lower frame. "See any sign of him, Jed?"

"Not yet," said Cartwright. "You figure he knows there is someone here with you, Seth?"

"Don't know," said Anders. "He might not have seen you sitting in that chair on the other side of the table. Depends on how long he was out there before he fired the first shot—*There he is!*"

The old cowman raised the rifle and fired once at the shadowy figure that was running toward the house. The drygulcher appeared to have been halted by an invisible wall as a bullet struck him, and then he pitched forward to sprawl motionless on the ground.

"Nice shooting, Seth," Cartwright said. "Looks like you got him plumb center."

"Seems so," said Anders. "But we better go make sure, Jed."

Still carrying the rifle, Anders hurried out of the house with Cartwright following close behind him. The stars were bright in the vast expanse of sky and there was a little chill in the air. Winter would be here soon.

Anders put down the rifle and turned the dead man over on his back. The old cowman struck a match and examined the face of the corpse in the flickering light.

"Recognize him?" Cartwright asked as he stood watching.

"Yes," Anders said as the match went out. "It's Matt Lakeland."

"Lakeland," said Cartright. "The man who bought the ranch? I never knew him."

"You didn't miss much." Anders stood up. "A tight-fisted hombre if I ever knew one. So this is why he insisted on paying cash. Figured he could come out here, down me, and steal back the ten thousand and the ranch, too."

"Why the dirty skunk," said Cartright indignantly. "He sure needed killing."

"Trouble is, I've got to prove to the sheriff, just what happened," Anders said. "I'd kinda like to keep the Rocking A now instead of selling. Like you said a while ago, I never was a man to quit and Ma and Seth, Junior, wouldn't like it."

"You reckon the sheriff would take the word of an ex-convict if I backed you up about what's happened?" Cartright demanded.

"Might be, if you're willing to talk, Jed," said Anders. "But I thought you were aiming to kill me."

"A man can change his mind, can't he?" said Cartright. Then, turning away, he said, "Somebody coming!"

They waited and a few moments later a horseman rode into the yard.

"It's Sheriff Tom Pope," said Anders. "Also new since your time, Jed."

POPE WAS a gaunt, middle-aged man. He halted his bay nearby and looked at Anders and Cartright and at the dead man.

"Heard shooting as I was riding by on the road," said the sheriff as he swung out of the saddle and dropped his reins. "What's wrong?"

Anders told him exactly what had happened. Pope listened silently until the old cowman had finished.

"Could be the other way around, Seth," the lawman said. "Lakeland might have come out to take over his property and you downed him hoping to keep the ranch and the money."

"That don't make sense, Sheriff," said Cartright, whom Anders had introduced as a friend. "Everybody in town probably knows Seth sold the ranch to Lakeland and was paid cash. Seth couldn't make anybody believe otherwise. Nothing for him to gain by killing Lakeland. He did it to pro-

tect his own life when Lakeland tried to drygulch him."

"Prove the drygulching part of it," said the sheriff.

"All right," said Cartright. "Come on to the house and I'll prove it."

The three men entered the ranch-house and Anders lighted the lamp in the living room. Cartright showed the sheriff the broken window and the bullets in the rear wall. "And you could check the bullets with Lakeland's gun," Cartright said.

"I'm convinced," Pope said finally. "Been afraid you were right from the first. Sort of trick Matt would try to pull. I should know—since I'm his first cousin and nearest of kin." The sheriff smiled at the old cowman. "Plain case of self-defense, Seth."

"Would you be willing to sell me the ranch back for the ten thousand Lakeland paid me?" Anders asked the sheriff. "If it can be done legal-like, of course."

"Suits me," said Pope. "I know that Matt left me everything in his will as his next of kin. See me in my office tomorrow, and we'll try and arrange it then, Seth. Right now I've got to take Matt back to town."

Anders and Cartright found themselves again alone on the ranch.

"Time we got you something to eat, Jed," said Anders. "I'm kinda hungry, too. Funny, I ain't so tired of living as I was a while back."

"And I'm not so set on doing any killing," said Cartright with a smile.

"My boy would have been your age if he had lived," said Anders. "How'd you like to be in the cattle business?"

"Huh?" Cartright said in amazement.

"I sort of feel I owe you something for those fifteen years I took out of your life," said Anders. "How about being my partner in running the Rocking A, Jed?"

"My gosh," said Cartright dazedly. "And I darn near killed the goose that laid the golden eggs."

Anders glanced at the empty chair. Seemed like Martha was sitting there and young Seth was standing beside her and they both were smiling at him like they were mighty pleased.

So Seth smiled at Cartright, "Come on, partner, let's eat!" ●END

BATTLE OF PIERRE'S HOLE

by Sam Allison

THE GREATEST battle ever fought between fur traders and Indians in the mountains took place at Pierre's Hole in the summer of 1832.

There was eminent personel on both sides, for the fur men had Milton and William Sublette, Henry Fraeb, Thomas Fitzpatrick, Jim Bridger, David Jackson, Nathaniel Wyeth, and many others.

The Indians, on the other hand, were the most implacably hostile of all Indians in the West, and possibly in America—the Gros Ventres of the Prairie, tribal affiliates of the Arapahoes. They headquartered in Blackfoot country and customarily talked Blackfoot with the whites, so they were commonly known as

The Blackfeet attacked!



criss-crossed with dozens of trails made by men from the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, the American Fur Company, and the Hudson's Bay Company, and it was at the time of their annual rendezvous that the Gros Ventres had the bad luck to trail into the valley. This summer there were several hundred Nez Perce and Flat-

head Indians, come to trade furs, as well as a large number of company men and free trappers.

Joseph Meek, Milton Sublette, and Thomas Fitzpatrick, of the Rocky Mountain Company, had been dodging William Vanderburgh and Andrew Drips of the American Fur Company all summer. It seemed to be the purpose of the two American furmen to trail the Rocky Mountain men to find

It was a highly successful rendezvous, with hundreds of Indians come to trade as well as many fur company men and free trappers, and all that was needed to top it off was a good bloody massacre...

Blackfeet or Falls Indians.

It was their custom every two or three years to migrate southwest to visit the Arapahoes, and on these trips they were hostile to all tribes along the way, so their trail was always marked with blood.

The place, Pierre's Hole, was a beautiful valley, some 30 miles long, on the Teton River. It was in Idaho, across the Teton Mountains from Jackson Hole, and later became known as the Teton Basin. It got its name from an Iroquois Indian who first discovered it.

The Rocky Mountain area was

out where furs could be obtained.

Fitzpatrick and some of the others reached the rendezvous point at Pierre's Hole and to their great disgust Vanderburgh and Drips showed up, although their pack train of supplies was still somewhere in the mountains.

It was about time for the trappers and Indians to assemble, and Fitzpatrick and his men well knew that once they were in the valley with their packs, they would trade with anybody who had goods—especially lead, gunpowder, coffee and whisky.

Therefore Fitzpatrick started

southeast to find William Sublette and hurry him to the rendezvous with trade goods for the Rocky Mountain. He made contact on the Platte River, 400 miles away, and then Fitzpatrick, having broken the news, hurried back to advise those at the rendezvous that Rocky Mountain goods were on the way.

This was extremely wild country, with many tribes of hostile Indians. Fitzpatrick led a saddled horse for possible escape. As it turned out, he got a chance to use the extra mount.

HE REACHED the valley of the Green River, south of Pierre's Hole, and ran head-on into a party of Gros Ventres. He switched horses fast and ran off to the mountains, where he concealed himself. He stayed there for three days, then came out and ran into the same Indians again. This time he lost the second horse, with all equipment and blankets. All he saved was his rifle, and all the powder and lead he had were in it.

He lost himself among the rocks and stayed for several days, but finally made his way on foot toward the rendezvous. He lived on roots and berries, and when his moccasins wore out, he made others out of his hat. He lost his rifle in a river, but finally was discovered by two Iroquois hunters, who loaned him a horse. He arrived in bad shape.

William Sublette was already there. The Rocky Mountain company had perhaps 200 men present; the American company had a large party; Nathaniel J. Wyeth and his small brigade of New England beaver hunters and salmon fishers were there; and the plains at the bottom of the valley were covered with the tipis of Indians, free trappers, and just about everybody else within hog-calling distance. The annual rendezvous was some doin's.

Trading had been going fine while the Rocky Mountain people had worried about Fitzpatrick, because in spite of the fact that Vanderburgh and Drips had sent messengers looking for Lucien Fontenelle with the American Fur goods, he wasn't there yet. So Rocky Mountain was having a field day, with the usual brisk trad-

ing, horse races, card games, realignment of the squaws' affections, and undoubtedly plenty of drinking.

(Alcohol in fur-trading is a touchy subject; they were not supposed to use it, but somebody always did. In fact, at one time one of the most successful of all American fur men built a distillery in the post at Fort Union.)

The rendezvous began to break up on July 17, after nine days of business. Milton Sublette, delayed by a bullet wound in an Indian fight, had come in, and now he prepared to lead out to the southwest; Wyeth and his men were going with him, and so were John Sinclair and fifteen free trappers under him.

Meantime, the Rocky Mountain people had offered to divide the trapping territory with Vanderburgh and Drips, but the offer had been refused.

Milton Sublette's outfit camped that night about eight miles down the river from the rendezvous area. The next morning, as they broke camp, somebody saw a long line of people in a defile in the mountains. They came howling down onto the plains—250 Gros Ventres warriors, squaws, and children. One report says the warriors were painted. Several reports say that they carried a British flag they had lifted from some Hudson's Bay post.

In Sublette's outfit was a halfbreed, Antoine Godin, whose Cherokee father had been killed by this same outfit of Gros Ventres. He rode out to meet them, accompanied by a Flathead Indian whose tribe had been badly crushed by the Gros Ventres. With Fitzpatrick fresh from a narrow escape from this same band, it was not what might be called a happy situation.

A Gros Ventre chief advanced, holding out his hand. Godin took it. At the same time the Flathead fired a bullet into the chief's chest. Godin tore off the chief's richly ornamented red blanket and retreated to camp at full speed. The other Gros Ventres shot at him but didn't hit him.

Now the Gros Ventres took shelter at the edge of a swamp, where the cottonwoods and willows gave cover, and a tangle of creeping vines made it difficult to find them. The warriors kept up a covering fire while the

squaws prepared logs and brush as breast-works.

WILLIAM SUBLETTE and Robert Campbell (another great name in fur-trading) were at the rendezvous point when a messenger galloped up the valley, crying the fearful word: "Blackfeet!"

Everybody turned out with enthusiasm. A good bloody massacre would just top off the lively events of the summer right. The hundreds of Nez Perces and Flatheads joined in; it wasn't often they got a chance to pot-shoot the Gros Ventres.

When William Sublette got there, the enemy was entrenched, and even the Nez Perces shook their heads at the idea of going into that tangle after the Gros Ventres. But Sublette took his rifle and crawled in, followed by Campbell and John Sinclair. They reached a more open part of the thick-et and saw that the Gros Ventres had wasted no time; they had improved their log fortress.

Sinclair was shot in the body and carried out. Sublette got a bullet in the shoulder and he too was carried out. In the meantime, Andrew Drips' Indian wife gave birth to a child.

The trappers now concentrated their fire on the fort, but Wyeth and some Nez Perces got on the opposite side and the two trapper forces were soon shooting into each other. The Gros Ventres, outnumbered five to one, made no offer to surrender. The Gros Ventres chief, however, roared at them in a lull in the battle:

"We retreated here to die with our women and children," he said. "You

may burn us in our fort, but stay by our ashes and you will soon have enough fighting. There are four hundred lodges of our tribe near. Their arms are strong. They will avenge us!"

This speech was misinterpreted, and a large part of the attacking force galloped back to the rendezvous to protect their possessions. A few were left to watch the Gros Ventres. By the time the big party returned from the false alarm the next morning, the Gros Ventres had vanished.

One squaw with a broken leg was left mourning at the corpse of a warrior. They killed her.

Reports on wounded and injured vary considerably. One estimate gives the trappers 5 dead and 6 wounded (John Sinclair died); others say 3 and 8, or 6 and 6, and one says 32 and 48. Seven Nez Perces were killed. Probably 26 Gros Ventres were killed.

This was not the last of the Gros Ventres. The fight delayed Sublette's departure, and some of Wyeth's party struck out for home. The next day three of them were killed by the Gros Ventres.

Fitzpatrick and Bridger, going to one of their favorite trapping grounds on Jefferson Fork, found Vanderburgh and Drips on their trail again. They tried to lose them, but couldn't. Finally they led them straight into the heart of Blackfeet country. The Indians attacked. Vanderburgh was killed. A few days later Bridger himself received the famous arrow head that he carried in his hip for two years.

The Gros Ventres, it seems, could take care of themselves. ●END

THE KILLER THAT CAME

and Condeen reared back on his knees, the pitchfork swinging back and up and just before Hines pulled the trigger, Condeen threw the fork.

It struck Hines just beneath the armpits, full across the chest, the sharp tines sinking through bone and lung and muscle. Hines went back under the blow, his gun firing and the tines met the hard earth and went no further and Hines lay there, arched backwards just off the ground, the fork handle quivering...

How long Condeen lay on the edge

(continued from page 18)

of the loft, one hand dangling down, he didn't know. He had an idea of steps on the ladder and hands turning him and May's voice. And a long time afterward he recognized Ed Johnson's voice. Someone worked his leg and it pained him greatly.

But even stronger than the pain was the thought that he had closed the door on his past, but not with a gun. Instead he had used only the weapon of his hands, his own strong hands, and through the pain Luke Condeen knew gladness. ●END

THE BLOODY EVIDENCE

The Paiutes had Emark staked fast, and death blinked at him with a chilling rattles!



by
**ARCHIE
JOSCELYN**

As long as they were saddlemates, Flint knew that Emark figured him more dangerous than their common enemy, the ever-lurking blood-hungry Paiutes.

THE NAME of "Flintridge MacKendrick" was carved on a tombstone in Vermont. That had been Flint's father, his father's marker, and likely the last marker for the MacKendricks. For it looked as though the line would end with Flint here among these craggy Arizona hills.

Which was a pity, Flint decided, coming right after he'd met that girl in Yuma. She'd had such a wistful, lonely look, and he'd hoped for a better acquaintance.

He held his fire, drawing a long

slow breath, steadying himself against the impulse to shoot too fast. He rested cheek and shoulder against the rock, cooled by the shade to a point where flesh could bear the contact.

He'd gotten into a bad fix this time. The Paiutes had him dead to rights, and the worst part was that the brown devils knew it. It was one against a score, and his ammunition was running low—and if they didn't know that for sure, they doubtless guessed it, which amounted to the same.

A tuft of black hair sprouted above a sun-drenched boulder, half a hun-

dred feet away. It was like a civet cat's snout, with the merest glitter of matching eyes. Flint took his time and squeezed off a shot. The tufting hair vanished, then a brown body slid loosely from behind the rock, hung poised a moment in the white glare of sun, and slipped into space.

It was a long way down, as would be the case if Flint took a step to the rear. He was cornered, driven back till he could retreat no farther. There was one advantage in the drop-off at his back—no one could get behind him. But it was scant comfort when they were on three sides, with the afternoon at its hottest. His tongue was thick above cracking lips. They'd had him shut away from water since the dawn.

A pair of warriors showed themselves, rising up simultaneously, a hundred feet apart, slipping closer. This time his shot was hasty, and a miss. Both obtained their objectives.

One had a single feather, red as blood, twined in his braid. He was close enough for flanking. Then suddenly this one raised up jerkily from behind the cover he'd gained, in a wild-flinging gesture of arms, as if in appeal to his savage gods. Just as abruptly he collapsed, tumbling backward, pitching out of sight as the sound of the rifle caught up.

Flint took heart, conscious of vast surprise. He'd had no hope of assistance. Now, with the other gun spitting like a hungry panther, he could risk his remaining ammunition. He made it count.

The big gun booming at their rear was too much for the Paiutes. They vanished like shadows, and Flint looked upon his rescuer, and the face of each twisted with recognition. The gray glint of Emark's eyes was highlighted with self-mockery.

"So it was you they were trying to kill, Flintridge," the Englishman remarked. "Well, that's the fortunes of war," he added philosophically. "We'd best be on the move, before they rally to try again."

"If you'd only known, eh?" murmured Flint, his articulation somewhat thick. Emark gave him a probing glance and extended his canteen. Flint drank gratefully.

"That wasn't cricket, old man,"

Emark protested. "After all, a white man's a white man, and in the face of the common enemy—"

Flint wiped his mouth and returned the canteen.

"I'm grateful," he said. "I didn't mean it quite the way it sounded. I was just thinking of what we call luck."

Emark's thin brown face crinkled to an introspective smile.

"Apology accepted, old man," he conceded. "Luck is a bally mysterious thing, at that. Strange how you follow where I lead, eh?" His tone was faintly derisive, then he sobered. "When it comes to that, I suppose we shouldn't blame the bloody devils too much. Killing enemies is their business. And after all, they never invited us into their country."

HIS WORDS lingered in Flint's mind as he neared Yuma, a week later. They had journeyed together three days, amicably and for mutual protection, each understanding the other and his intent when they parted. Emark would continue the game he played, for it was his nature to do so. He was a gambler by instinct and training, and high stakes were matched by high risks. The Paiutes were one hazard, Flint another. But the land was wide in tumbled emptiness, and that was half the challenge.

They'd gained a better understanding in those three days. Flint had confided that he'd met a girl, and his eyes were hungry for her. Emark had sat in silence a long while, while night shadowed the land. There had been a wistful touch to his voice when finally he spoke.

"Your having met a girl—maybe that will help you understand," he said. "I left one behind, in England—couldn't support her the way she deserved. Nothing like making the try though, old boy."

So that was his real reason, risking largely in the hope of large reward—for her. Flint sympathized, though it couldn't change his purpose to frustrate Emark if he could; nor, of course, would the Englishman want him to. Gentlemen played the game, and there was no doubt that Emark was a gentleman.

But complications could twist a

man's code. He saw nothing wrong in the game he played, salting a wild distant land with a promise of quick and easy fortune. Those most likely to fall for such lures were gamblers like himself, ready to risk much for high stakes. Men who made money by dubious means, who could afford a gambler's loss. To Emark it was a sporting proposition, in which he placed his own life on the scales.

His schemes were never cheap nor run-of-the-mill. Some men would salt a claim with gold and lure the unwary. Emark salted with something more precious—or Flint believed that he did. Emark planted diamonds in the roughness of desert and hills.

Flint had found a few of them, diamonds in the rough. But even though he was an expert on such matters, he couldn't say positively that Emark had planted them, rather than nature. The job was so well done, in favorable terrain where precious stones might possibly be found. For proof, he must catch Emark in the act, find him with the goods on him. That was a sizeable job, for Emark was skillful.

Emark would turn up in a city, such as San Francisco, back from a prospecting trip, with a handful of what he professed to have found. Twice he'd showed himself in the marts of money; his diamonds had whetted cupidity. If there were many such stones to be had, the diamond mines of Africa would be eclipsed.

The catch was that those discoveries were in wild country, the Indians bitterly hostile. To exploit such finds would require a strong company, well organized and financed, prepared to fight the land and its guards. A company backed by rich men, ready to gamble.

Emark was playing for cash in advance, for information as to where to go.

He was too shrewd, too canny an operator, to send men where they would find only emptiness. They'd find the land well salted. Flintridge MacKendrick had been hired to discover if Emark's reports were genuine or fiction. If he reported favorably, the moguls of finance would invest.

THE GAME had continued nearly a year, each understanding the other. Meanwhile, fever mounted in the blood of men anxious to speculate. Should Flint fail to return, they would take the plunge. In that lay irony, for the Paiutes had been doing their best to make sure that he did not return.

The moguls of finance were gamblers, and they hired Flint, but he wasn't worried on their account. Let them take their chances; the trouble was that others would follow their example. Old folks, widows, with a meagre saving to invest; money they could ill afford to lose...

Yuma was magnolias and moonlight, for she was there, and frankly glad to see him. He'd intended to stay two days, and he lingered five. There was, he found, kindness in her eyes to match the beauty in her cheeks; with kindness went integrity, the inward sweetening, the womanly leavening. Flintridge shook his head in whimsical half-regret and resumed the path of duty.

It was not an easy dream to give over, for she was a woman to remember. Perhaps that was what put the dream in his eyes, turning him careless. In such country a man could not afford a single moment short of full alertness. He made a misstep on a twisting path and fell, plunging a dozen feet. Luck was with him, bringing him up short, unhurt, barely short of a thousand-foot drop-off.

But his rifle took the plunge. So too, did his revolver, sliding from holster. And to be unarmed in Paiute country was more than risky.

He still had his canteen, slung from the strap over his shoulder; he had powder, a sizeable handful for blasting, to test hard ground should he find more of Emark's salted diamonds. But of what use was powder without a gun to use it in?

Emark and his trail could wait; he'd head back for Yuma by the shortest route. But that course, an hour later, brought him upon Emark, sitting on the ground, like a child with blocks. There were no Indians in sight, only the evidence that they had been there; departing, they had left the

Englishman to the slow simmering of vengeance.

How they'd captured him didn't matter. They were patient, these Paiutes, and skillful. Ten days before, Emark had spoiled things for them, when they'd had Flint trapped. Now they had Emark, staked fast, and death blinked lidlessly at him in the flatness of desert between sun-hot rocks, shivered at him with swaying flat head and chilling rattle.

Flint had heard of such things; this was the first time he'd witnessed them. Narrow stringy thongs of rawhide fastened Emark to the stake. A yard away, a diamond-back was tied to a second stake.

They had slit a fold in the scaly skin back of the rattler's flat head. Through the slit the Indians had passed the rawhide which bound it to its stake. Calculating the distance carefully, it was fixed so that the angry reptile could coil and lunge, striking desperately at the face of the man, which could be pulled back barely out of reach.

As an added touch, they had taken Emark's gun, but in its stead had left an ancient weapon—a bell-mouthed blunderbuss, an old muzzle-loading shotgun. It too, was just out of reach.

HOW MANY times the reptile had coiled and lunged during the hours of their common captivity, there was no way of knowing; many, of course. Each failure whetted its rage, even as the slitted skin tore a little with the fury of its lunges. Gradually, as the skin ripped, it came closer.

Soon it would be able to reach. Emark's eyes were glazed with horrible certainty.

He blinked unbelievably as Flint smashed the flat head with his boot heel, and the sound which struggled past his lips was between moan and choke. Flint got him loose, then set his canteen to swollen lips. Presently, Emark was able to speak.

"Bread upon the waters, what?" he gasped, and was violently sick. Flint waited, then helped him to his feet. It was a Paiute trick to stake out a victim in such fashion and leave him alone with creeping death. But sooner or later they would return to view the results, and generally they con-

trived to be back in time for the climax.

"They're coming," said Emark, and indicated what might have been a moving shadow.

Flint snatched up the ancient gun, as they ducked for cover. Well armed, they'd stand a good chance of holding the enemy off, of fighting their way out. Here was a narrow passage between high walls of rock, rising sheer on either side, not difficult to defend.

But it ended as a trap, with no exit. Knowing them unarmed—they'd soon make sure—the Paiutes would come swarming.

Flint examined the musket. In its day it had been an effective weapon, capable of terrible destruction at close range.

The greenish hue had left Emark's face. It was returning to its habitual hue of well-tanned leather.

"If we had powder, we could turn the joke on them," he suggested. "They'll be so massed that a charge would make a bloody slaughter—shrapnel, you know. One such dose, where they didn't expect it, and the survivors wouldn't linger." He sighed. "If we only had some powder!"

"I've powder enough for one heavy charge," Flint said. "But we've no bullets—nothing to use for shrapnel. Ten ton boulders are a bit too big."

"So they are, old boy. But since you have the powder, we've no lack. Look! It's what you've been wanting to see for a long time, anyhow."

From a hidden lining in his shirt he poured out a double handful of carefully concealed treasure—diamonds. Diamonds in the rough, as such stones must appear when found, having the additional merit of being cheap when purchased in bulk. "These should serve."

Flintridge's breath eased from his lungs. Torn cloth from the shirt made pads to hold the charge in place. The diamonds were hard and sharp, deadly.... They moved forward, to where the enemy clustered, half a hundred nerving themselves to the final charge. Emark swung up the gun and squeezed down the trigger.

It was concentrated destruction, and when it was over, the way was clear. They walked a while in silence.

"I think that's what you wanted,"

Emark suggested. "The bloody evidence."

"All shot away," Flint pointed out. "In any case—well, you remember I told you of a girl in Yuma. I saw her again, and confidentially, I came as close to falling in love as a man could, till I learned that she was wed already."

Emark shook his head sympathetically.

"Too bad," he murmured.

"She had come to Arizona, looking for her man," Flint went on. "His name, I gathered, was the same as yours. And I doubt there'd be two such in so thinly populated a territory."

Longing and regret were in Emark's eyes as he looked toward the sunset.

"The trouble, Flintridge, is that

I've always been a ne'er-do-well," he sighed. "Couldn't support her. With these diamonds, I had hopes. It seemed a good plan. And for her—worth it. But now—"

"She's waiting for you," Flint said gently. "She came from England with news—glad tidings. Seems you've inherited a title—estates, that sort of thing."

Emark looked incredulous.

"Couldn't be, old chap," he remarked seriously. "Three ahead of me in the line. Impossible odds. Discounted any chances long since."

"There was a storm, a foundered ship off the Scottish coast," Flint explained. "All hands lost, and all three were on board. Now let's keep moving. A woman, even such a one, grows lonely with waiting too long."

● END

MANHUNT

(continued from page 12)

"Sorry to hear that. Then it's just a matter of time, huh?"

"That's right."

AFTER WILKS had gone, the doctor sauntered back to the bed and stood there watching Pearsall. The marshal's breathing was becoming more and more labored. Then, as the doctor bent over him, his breath ebbed out of him.

Minutes later, when the sheet was drawn up over Jim Pearsall's head, the doctor packed his bag. He took a last look around the room. Suddenly remembering, he put his hand in his pocket and brought out a letter that the hotel clerk had given him earlier and asked him to turn over to Pearsall. It had come for Pearsall about a month before, he recalled the clerk telling him.

The doctor looked at it unhappily, wished he had remembered it sooner and given it to Pearsall while the man was still alive. He tapped it on his thumbnail. He held it up again. It was addressed to Pearsall in care of the hotel. In a lower corner of the envelope were the underlined words: "PLEASE HOLD. WILL BE CALLED FOR."

He was about to tear it up but then, because he was young he yielded to overpowering curiosity, and he ripped open the envelope, took out the single, folded sheet of paper and read:

Dearest Jim:

You've probably given up hope because I've delayed my reply so long. But I wanted to be absolutely certain before I answered.

Even though I destroyed your letter immediately after I had read it, I can still see every word, every line in it, as clearly as though I still had it before me.

I've made up my mind, Jim. I'm leaving Hod. I will be in Storm River on Tuesday, August 14th. I know you are due there before that; since you told me that you always stay at the hotel there, you'll get this when you engage your room. Then you can rearrange your schedule and return to Storm River on the 14th in time to meet me.

I'll be ready to go with you, Jim, wherever you may want to take me.

Edie

● END

GIRL IN THE NIGHT

by
John
Lumsden

He kicked the
gun out of the
man's hand.



A cowboy didn't often get to hold such a pretty girl in his arms. So that Jack Lally forgot about the gun...



HE DIDN'T expect to find a girl hunkered by the fire. An outlaw maybe, or a Ranger—he could even have hoped it would be just a nice friendly cowhand between jobs like himself—but not a girl.

Jack Lally was an extra-big young man anyway, but he loomed bigger than ever in comparison with the slight, lively young lady. She showed how lively she was when she became aware of him standing there just outside the circle of firelight. First she scrambled in one direction, then, evidently remembering that she'd moved

her blanket-roll to another point, she dove there instead and grabbed a six-gun and aimed it at Jack.

"Put your hands up!" she said, but she didn't handle the tough words very easy, like they were what she'd read someplace you were supposed to say on such an occasion as this.

But she had a very nice voice, Jack thought. Soft and sweet and somehow familiar. Like it was a voice you had dreamt about, familiar that way. And her right hand, glistening in the firelight as it gripped the gunstock fiercely, had a sweet little look to it

too. So that without being able to see her face, standing as she was with her back to the blaze, Jack felt very sure she was a very pretty girl.

And then Jack Lally thought, what a lowdown blame thing a man is, because here I am, the first thought that comes into my head is how it would be to grab this helpless little girl and kiss her. Before I even know what she looks like. Or anything about her. Much less whether she'd be interested in having a lunk like me grab her. And before I even have a half a concern for her feelings at seeing a big stranger suddenly loom up in the middle of the night.

Jack Lally said, "You don't have to worry none about me, honey. If I meant you any harm, I could have moved in, see, while you was lookin' around for your gun."

He could tell that the simple logic of this took her slightly aback, just from the way she didn't reply right off; and he saw the gun waver a little in her hand too.

"So if you want to put that cannon away we could mebbe have a kind of a late supper together. I got some bacon, so if you had some—"

"No," she said abruptly then. "No I don't want anything to eat."

"Uh huh," Jack Lally said. Then he said, "I seen your fire, see, so that was how-come I walked in. Left my horse down below there."

"Yes. Well, you'd better go now."

"That fire ain't goin' to last two minutes, the way you got them sticks layin' side by side like that," he said, and he went to it and, reaching in quickly, picked up several of the half-burnt pieces of wood and criss-crossed them where the flame was the best. "Like that you want to do it."

"Yes. Well, thank you very much, but—"

Jack Lally had picked up one of the wood chips again and was inspecting it. "Hey, you didn't find this kindlin' around here. This here's pine—"

"Will you go now? Or I will be forced to use this gun. It is fully loaded."

Jack Lally hadn't been thinking particularly about going anyway, but when, glancing up now from where he was hunkered at the fire, he real-

ly got a good look at the girl's face, he *knew* he wasn't going. Because if she wasn't the prettiest female he'd ever seen, she came awful blamed close to being.

And another funny thing, he realized now, was she wasn't dressed at all for riding, she had on nothing but a calico dress, a kind of fancy one at that, with a frilly business around the low-cut neck. She wasn't even wearing riding boots, just some kind of flimsy satiny-looking affairs that could have been Eastern-type bedroom slippers.

SO WHAT Jack Lally did was sit down, right where he was crouched, putting a hand back doing it but without taking his eyes off the girl's face. Golly, those big, beautiful eyes, and those red lips, and all that wonderful soft dark hair—

"I will count to ten and if you are not on your horse by then I will pull the trigger."

"Okay," Jack said, getting to his feet. And even though he'd moved quickly without giving himself any time to reflect on it, he could feel his heart pounding already like a blamed schoolgirl's at the thought of what he was about to do.

"Please don't try anything," the girl said, backing a little, "because I don't want to have to shoot you. I am counting."

"Okay," Jack said, taking a made-up corn-husk cigarette from the breast pocket of his cotton shirt and twisting it into a corner of his mouth. He reached down for a burning stick. "Just wanted to light up first." He put the flame to the quirley. "Clean out of matches."

"...five...*six*..."

It was as he turned from tossing the stick back into the fire that he grabbed her. He had never held such a pretty girl in his arms before and doing it almost made him forget about the gun.

"Oh!" Her outcry was anguished, there was the hint of tears in it.

"Whoa," he said.

He got the gun out of her hand, and he spit out the cigarette so it wouldn't ignite her hair. She didn't struggle much; she was a very slight girl and he was a very husky young man.

"Whoa," he said again.

"Oh, let go of me," the girl moaned.

Was I any kind of a man, I'd kiss her, Jack Lally thought. *Now when I got her like this.*

But he didn't know how such an attempt would work out, and anyway his blame heart was whamming away so he could hardly think straight, and besides he'd done enough to her, he'd already scared daylight out of the poor kid.

So he abruptly let go of her.

"I ain't going to hurt you," he said lamely. "Just didn't want you indulgin' in any target practice with me as the target."

JACK LALLY was thirty-two years old. He'd never reckoned he would ever amount to much and in this calculation he had been, to date, correct. There were just some fellows were the go-getters and some were the lunkheads, and he was pretty well convinced now that he was one of the latter.

He'd made a few sallies at trying to figure out how an ordinary cowhand got to be a foreman; and he'd done a little investigating of how it was a man got hold of the necessary capital to start up his own spread; but somehow he doubted if he'd ever feel right in either of these roles. It always felt so blamed good to get back to a plain, ordinary job of cow-punching.

It had been the same with girls. Seemed like only the foremen and the bosses had what it took to move in on the pretty girls. It was only ramrods and ranch owners that the pretty girls would ever seem to look at. Like with that little golden-haired number he'd had his eye on up at Dodge; in the restaurant there. Jack had thought she kind of liked him until that hawk-faced cattle buyer from St. Louis showed up.

And the other ones; that little sloe-eyed dressmaker—she'd even gone for a couple of rides in the moonlight with him, and had let him hold her hand; and then, wham, she'd packed up and lit out all of a sudden and he'd never again seen hide nor hair of her.

Of course, the whole trouble was

with himself. It was all just a matter of it was time he grew up and got wise to himself. And to the facts of life. And stopped reachin' for the moon, for cripes sake. What did he think he was, some Don Juan or Romeo or something, to expect a beautiful girl to want to settle down with him on his forty a month and found? A lug with his looks and prospects would be lucky if any female would pay him any attention, much less a prize beauty—

Those words entering his head brought Jack Lally's attention back to the girl. Because that's what she certainly was all right, a prize beauty. She was backed against one of the two big boulders, had been standing that way ever since he'd released her, with her big dark eyes wider than ever. And she voiced the very thought that came to Jack Lally at that moment:

"Now that you've disarmed me, what are you going to do with me?"

And there it was, his blame ticker whamming away again, so that he was afraid to take out a cigarette even, he was so sure his danged hand would be shaking too much to light the danged thing.

But the need to come to a decision on this question was lifted from Jack Lally. For the present at least. By the tall man who chose that time to make his presence known.

"Why he ain't goin' to do nothin' to yuh, ma'm," the new voice drawled. "'Cause I ain't goin' to let him."

The man stepped into the fireglow, and the flickering light playing on his face perhaps gave his wide grin a more wolfish look than it actually possessed. His unshaven appearance didn't help here either, nor the easy familiarity that his big right hand obviously had with the oil-slick, long-muzzled sixshooter it hefted. Not aimed at Jack Lally exactly, but carried ready, the way a man did when he was sizing a small target preparatory to flipping a potshot at it.

Jack Lally, still standing in the same spot where, a few minutes before, he'd released the girl, had been scratching his head when the stranger spoke, and now he stopped doing this and pulled his stetson on again.

And his heart stopped the pounding, and a look of capability came over Jack Lally as though it were an outfit that he could slip on at will.

For if Jack Lally wasn't too handy at high finance nor very sure of himself around the ladies, where he was completely at home was in straight man-to-man stuff. He so welcomed, in fact, any opportunity to move into this one field where he was wholly at ease, wholly certain he was the match of any man, that he was just as apt as not to walk right into an antagonist's hail of bullets if they happened to come at him at a moment when he'd set his mind on laying hands on the fellow.

"Where the devil did you come from," Jack Lally grumbled.

The stranger had approached from the opposite direction from Jack Lally, through a stretch of buckbrush (and it was testimony to how preoccupied Jack Lally was that he hadn't heard the man pushing through it) and a horse's low whinny came from there now.

"I reckon, ma'am," the fellow said, ignoring Jack Lally, "that was your little mare ground-hitched the other side of the brush." His grin widened. "Sounds like her and my pony are becoming acquainted."

Jack Lally thought about the .45 on his own hip. Hell, he'd never even got much good with a gun. Way he always did it, he just grabbed the blame thing and started blazing away. He'd been in a couple of gun-ruckuses, and come out of them alive, but probably the men he'd gone to it with on those occasions hadn't been fast-draw artists either. Like this bewhiskered one looked to be.

"Look, fella," Jack Lally said bluntly, "get goin'. You ain't welcome."

The stranger hadn't taken his eyes off the girl, but Jack knew that didn't mean he was off guard. He was that kind could seem to shoot a man between the eyes without looking at him; Jack could tell from the way the son held that long-muzzled iron.

The devil with it, Jack Lally suddenly thought, and he dove at the fellow. He had the fingers of his right hand clamped like steel on the stranger's gun-wrist before the man

could have put a bullet in Jack, and by then it was no use pulling trigger.

Jack whirled his body suddenly, yanking the stranger by the gun-wrist along with him, pulling the man thus almost onto one knee. Then Jack let go of the wrist and clubbed this same fist at the side of the stranger's head. This was designed to knock the man senseless, and would have if the stranger hadn't started to fall back onto his haunches from being released so suddenly.

So that Jack Lally's big fist went by the stranger's forehead like a speeding freight train, and Jack Lally's big body lunged foolishly after it across the stranger's lap.

So that, spotting his advantage at once, the stranger clubbed his long gun-barrel down onto Jack's cranium and dropped Jack senseless to the ground instead....

HE THOUGHT he probably hadn't been out long because when consciousness returned to Jack Lally he remembered at once about everything. And remembering that he'd passed out leaving the beautiful girl in the clutches of that bewhiskered son, he started up immediately, from where he was lying. Which, as far as he could tell, was right where he'd been dropped, because there was the fire—

Then he knew he'd been out for a couple of hours anyway, for the fire was nothing but a few embers now, and the light that he was seeing everything by, he realized, was the first edge of dawn. And then he really jumped up.

Not a sign of the girl or the stranger!

Jack Lally dove through the buckbrush, toward where he'd heard the horse neigh. He reached back to his holster and it was of course empty. He brought up a half-minute later as he crashed out of the thicket abruptly into a little grass-fringed clearing where two horses were hobbled.

For no particular reason other than it was doubtless the opening through which the stranger had come in originally, Jack Lally plowed now through a break in the brush on the far side of the clearing. He took running steps when he was able, whirled and twisted where the going became

tough, pushing on crazily. He was like a man who has dreamt of a beautiful girl only to find her gone on awakening, and he pushed on crazily as though if he hurried he might still not have to lose her.

He saw her when he stumbled out of the brush again, onto a kind of slow-downsloping ledge. Her and the stranger. They were twenty feet below on another rim, and the back of Jack Lally's mind told him automatically that the stranger had not heard him because of the stiff breeze coming up the shallow valley that these sandstone ledges overlooked.

The next thing Jack Lally noticed was the rider coming across the plat below, because the stranger, lying flat on his belly, had a .30-30 rifle lined on him. And the curious thing was that though Jack Lally did not see how the rider could have seen the stranger and the girl from below, he seemed to be riding straight toward them, was in fact looking up at them.

The girl's hands were tied behind her with a latigo, the long free end of the rawhide going to the stout trunk of a nearby gnarled, stunted tree, where it was lashed firmly. And it was hearing her moaning pleas that galvanized Jack Lally, though seeing a man about to be ambushed undoubtedly would have caused him to act with the same unconcern for his own hide.

"Oh no, oh no!" the girl was crying.

But just as Jack Lally was about to jump, the stranger called out to the rider, "Hey there!"

And the rider started to rein in.

Then the stranger called, "What's your business, fella?"

The rider did rein in then, his horse dancing in a half circle, lifting his forefeet once.

"From down Cool Creek way!" the rider yelled back.

And then it clicked in Jack Lally's brain. The kindling. That pine kindling the girl had been using. Was considerable of that kind of pine around Cool Creek—

Jack Lally squinted suddenly at the rider, and it all went leaden in his chest. And his arms felt heavy hanging at his sides, and his throat got tight. Because the rider, Jack

Lally saw now, was a very tall, handsome young man—the kind that would make a fine mate for a beautiful girl—

The stranger had relaxed the Winchester but now he carefully brought it into line again, drawing a cold bead on the rider. And Jack Lally saw in a flash what the stranger's idea had been—he'd simply wanted to stop the rider so he would have a sure, stationary target. And the rider had brought his mount around now so that it was finally standing quiet—

Jack Lally dove rather than jumped, and he splashed onto the stranger's back almost spread-eagled. He got up because he couldn't do much to the fellow in that position. When the stranger let go of the rifle and reached back for his .45, Jack Lally jammed a boot heel down hard on the back of the reaching hand. When the stranger rolled a little so that he could yank the sixgun stuck in his belt—the gun he'd taken from Lally—Jack kicked it out of the man's hand. When, after a crafty-eyed pause, the stranger said, "Okay, mister, you win," and got to his feet holding his bleeding right fist in his left, Jack Lally simply stood there with his big feet set wide apart watching him.

So that when the stranger suddenly uncorked that held right fist at Lally's face, Jack was simultaneously smashing his own right at the stranger's face. The stranger's fist never arrived. Because Jack Lally's did first.

"HE WOULD have killed you if it hadn't been for Mr. Lally," the girl sobbed. "And it would have all been my fault."

"Golly, I didn't even see the son putting the gun on me," Rod Anderson said. That was what the tall, handsome young man gave as his name when they introduced themselves all around. "I couldn't see anybody from below there. I'd shot off my sixshooter, see, hoping Marian would hear it and reveal where she was—and the dirty dog heard it and waved a shirt or something and yelled at me. That's why I rode right into his gunsights."

"Oh I've been such a fool, Rod, (please turn to page 56)

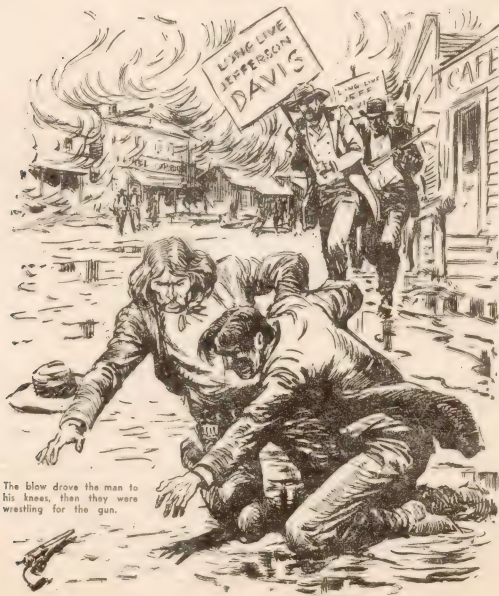
LETTER OF THE LAW

by Will Cook

MEL HARDIN was in a troubled frame of mind when he led the posse back to Oregon City, weary from a futile chase and pestered by the flatly swollen

drops of an intermittent rain. Along the roadside it poured from the dragging boughs in roapy cascades, and darkness was a cape loosely thrown over the raw, wild odor of the forest.

Will men always fight, finally, whether over grass or women or gun brag? Must peace first mean powder-smoke?



The blow drove the man to his knees, then they were wrestling for the gun.

The trail tilted sharply as it led from the broad Wilamette Valley, bordered on the east by the Cascades, crowded on the west by the Coast Range.

A sprinkling of buildings sat at a lonely distance, their yellow squares of light beckoning and warm. Mel Hardin paused by the trailside to pack his pipe, shielding the tobacco close to his body. The posse paraded by, the horses' hooves making sloughing sounds in the deep mud.

Matchlight flared briefly, then he whipped it out and shifted on his horse as Jethro Malloy reined in. "Devil of a night," Malloy said. "All this rammin' around for nothin', too." He took off his hat and slapped it against his leg; water made a soggy ruin of his hair.

Hardin pulled deep on his smoke. The badge sagging on his wet coat front picked up a faint light, gleaming dully. "We'll catch him," Mel said and knocked the dottle from his pipe.

"Like hell," Malloy said and pawed at the water dripping from his face. He shifted the rifle he held across the saddle. "Three days of this—all for a lousy Copperhead!"

"You wanted him," Hardin pointed out. "I didn't." Hardin was a tall man, loose-muscled, with a face that was broad and deep-lined. Although young, his drooping mustache and waterfall haircut made him appear older. There was a wisdom of men in the probe of his eyes, but the capacity for understanding lay in the loose set of his lips.

"Maybe you didn't want to catch him," Malloy said with some sullenness.

"You was there," Hardin said. "Make up your own mind who tried and who didn't." He turned his horse, following the posse toward the scattered lights of town.

Rain failed to drench the spirits of Oregon City. Saloon doors stood wide against the downpour and men waded across the muddy streets, calling to each other, moving aimlessly, for this was 1859, and the frontier; each man felt the urgency of it like a hand at his back.

Pausing before a log building with barred windows, Hardin nodded to

the weary men in the posse. "Thanks. Maybe the hunting will be better next time." Stripping off his saddlebags and soaked blankets, he kicked the door open and went inside.

Eli Parker took his feet from Hardin's desk, then vacated the chair. "You didn't get him," Parker said, not at all surprised. He was an older man, near fifty, with a seamed face and a shock of wild hair.

Hardin threw his gear in the corner and drew the blinds over the windows. Stripping off his wet clothes, he changed quickly into dry ones, then refastened his gun harness. Slanting a glance at Parker, he asked: "Did you expect me to?"

PARKER scratched his neck and slanted the tall man a puzzled look. "I wasn't so sure. You sure take out after them fellas like you mean business. Just what are you, Mel—Copperhead?"

"The sheriff," Hardin told him.

"Copperhead sheriff, then," Parker corrected. Hardin raised his head and stared at the man. Parker murmured, "Now don't pretend you're mad. We've been to the fork of the creek, you and me—I got a right to kick you once in a while."

"Forget it," Hardin said and put the teakettle on the pot-bellied stove. He poured hot water in a cracked porcelain bowl, lathered his face and scraped at his whiskers. Drying himself with a flour sack Hardin said: "That's three times I've been after the same man. Maybe I'll catch him the next time."

"Ah," Parker murmured. "Next week you'll chase an anti-slaver with a Copperhead posse. When's it going to end, Mel? What's the percentage for you? Was I you, I'd turn in that badge, get me a woman and start raisin' a cabin."

"Raise kids with a woman," Hardin said and smiled faintly.

"Kids later—cabin first." Parker came over and sat on the edge of the desk. "Want to know something? That fella you was chasin' came back into town the second day."

"That's what I figured," Hardin said and bit his lip. "All I do is chase a Copperhead one week and a pro-slaver the next. Only trouble is, they

can't seem to decide which side of the fence they want to stay on."

"I don't follow you," Parker admitted.

"Let it go," Mel said and stood up. "Town been quiet?"

Parker's shoulders rose and fell. "So-so. The usual fights and street brawls. Plenty of soap boxes—one on almost any corner. Them fellas ought to be made to shut up."

"A free country," Hardin told him and put on his coat. "Send a kid around to wake me at noon." He grinned and went out.

Emma Rigeley's boardinghouse sat on the southwest corner of Cascade Street and Hardin took care to remove the mud from his boots before entering the hall. Emma was in the kitchen and she leaned backward to peer through the open door and down the hallway.

"Just in time for a chocolate cake," she said and Hardin threw his wet coat and hat over the arm of a horse-hair love seat, then followed the aroma.

"Nothing but luxury," he said and settled himself at the kitchen table. Emma gave him a warm smile and juggled a hot pan before setting it on the drainboard of the sink.

"I wish you'd give up that job, Mel—maybe build somewhere. I can't help thinking it's such a waste."

There was no change in his face but his eyes grew grave as though she had touched on a tender thing. "There's other ways to build than with a pick and ax," he said.

"I know," she said. "But those are the ways a woman understands best."

He watched her; she made a picture of which he never wearied. Emma was small and well shaped. Dark hair lay in thick braids down her back and when she turned to face him, her eyes lighted with pleasure. "I'm glad you're back, Mel. You'll give me gray hair before I'm twenty-five."

"That's old," Hardin said with mock seriousness. "Spinsterhood, practically."

"Have your little joke," she told him and began whipping up a frosting for the cake. He went to the stove for his cup of coffee then took it to the table and sat with his hands around it, letting the warmth soak through

him. She brought the bowl to the table and sat across from him, mixing the sugar and milk.

"Tell me about it," she urged and put the bowl aside, folding her hands in the manner of a child about to hear a story.

Hardin shrugged. "He ran—we ran after him and we didn't catch him." He smiled. "Just that simple."

"It's not that simple and you know it. Who wanted him caught?"

"Jethro Malloy," Hardin said. "Malloy said this man stirred his men up and they refused to work. There was a fight in the freight yard and Malloy had a warrant sworn out." He glanced across to the sink. "How's the cake coming?"

"Cooling," she said. "Mel, you don't have any politics, do you?"

"No politics," he agreed.

"That's very dangerous for you," she said. "At a time like this, you have to be on one side or on the other."

"Which side are you on?" Mel asked.

She grew confused for a moment, then laughed. "All right, you win that one."

LEANING back in the chair, Mel Hardin packed his pipe carefully, then scratched a match on the underside of the table. "The whole land is a powder keg," he told her. "And I'm the man with his thumb over the hole so that some danged fool don't pitch a match in it." He settled back, one arm flung over the back of the chair. "People think I'm crazy to chase this fella and that one, but I got reasons. War's comin'—I'm sure of it. It's too late for the North and South to share anything or air their grievances and settle anything; but it isn't the pro-and anti-slavers here, Emma. There's something else—something I can't put my finger on.

"Take these fellas here—they're reasonable men, but when they get to whoopin' it up, they aren't anymore. Seems like someone's got a big stick in the pot and keeps stirrin' it, not wanting it to settle down by itself." He pointed to the cake with his pipe stem. "Cool now?"

"You've got a one-track mind," she said and rose to get it. Setting it on

the table, she frosted it quickly then cut two wedges out of it. Opening a can of peaches, she dished them and they ate a late meal.

Rain hammered against the shakes and slanted against the windows in a wavering sheet. Somewhere out on the street a gun pounded and a man's yell floated up, distorted by the wind. "It goes on and on," Mel said, nodding toward the sounds. "Guess someone's shot. Fact is, I should be out there, but it wouldn't do any good. Was he dead, I could arrest a man, but I'd have to let him go in the morning because men would cool off and wouldn't want to be a witness."

"Men always fight," Emma said philosophically. "Over horses, politics or a woman. If those aren't handy, they'll dream up something."

Hardin finished his cake and peaches, then knocked out his pipe in the woodbox. "I told Parker I was going to sleep until noon, but you'd better send someone in to wake me in two hours." He gave her a tired smile and walked to his room at the end of the hall.

Weariness made a deep stain on him and he lighted the lamp, then built a fire in the stove to drive the dampness from the room. A short time later he blew out the lamp and stripped to his underwear, letting the heat soak through him.

Well after one o'clock a soft knock on the door awakened him and he pulled his pants on in the dark. Coming into the kitchen he saw that Emma had prepared a meal for him. "You ought not to go to all this trouble," he said.

"Someone has to take care of you, Mel. You certainly don't care about yourself." She indicated his hat and coat hanging over the back of a chair. "They were soppin' wet. I dried them for you."

He listened to the rain beat against the side of the building, then said, "A fine thought but I'm afraid they won't stay that way long." After his meal he went back to his room for his shirt and gun, then went out on the street, his hat pulled low to shield his face. Gaming houses still catered to a brisk trade and halfway down the block he saw Parker making the rounds.

PUSHING his way through the milling throng, Hardin caught him as the man paused on a street corner to listen to a man preaching from a beer keg.

Parker grunted when Hardin nudged him, then nodded toward the man. "Listen to him. This goes on night and day." In a softer aside, he murmured, "That's your elusive friend, ain't it—the one you was after?" Parker indicated a man in the front row, a small man with a pinched face.

"That's him," Hardin said and watched the man on the barrel. Two lanterns had been hung on a wood awning edge and the speaker waved a pitch torch, sputtering and hissing in the slanting rain. He was huge and heavily whiskered and waved his arms to punctuate a loud voice. For awhile he rattled on about the 1850 Compromise and the strangulating power of Buchanan's administration, but Hardin listened with half an ear. He studied the crowd, testing the restlessness there, letting his attention linger longest on the sharp-faced man who had given him the slip.

This man listened to the speech, jeering in a loud voice, then put out a foot and tipped the barrel slightly.

The big man waved his hands frantically to regain his balance, all the time thundering curses at the crowd. Laughter rolled on the wind and Hardin moved around Parker, but the night marshal took his arm and said: "Don't be a fool, Mel. Let them fight it out among themselves."

Shaking the hand off, Hardin moved to a position three feet from the heckler. The speaker resumed his harangue and once again the thin-faced man in the front interrupted. This time he scooped up a handful of mud and cast it in a broad splash on the speaker's coat. The crowd roared at this and Hardin collared the man, pulling him toward the protective awning.

The crowd muttered angrily at this interruption but Parker moved around Hardin to stand between them. The thin-faced man tried to cuff Hardin but the lawman shoved him hard against the porch post, jarring him solidly.

"Cool off, friend," Hardin said softly. "This is a free country."

"Damned Copperhead sheriff," the man said and tried an awkward swing. He was not as tall as Hardin, tow-headed, his hair gleaming faintly now that his hat had been knocked to the mud. Hardin blocked the arm easily and pulled the man away from the post, slamming him back against it with enough force to stun him. "You gave me quite a chase, friend," Hardin murmured. "Let's have a little talk, shall we?"

The burly man on the barrel had gone back to his speech and the crowd's attention left Hardin and the blond man since apparently there was to be no fight. Hardin crowded the tow-head hard. "What's your game, friend? The other day you were a copperhead—now you're anti-slave. You playin' a little game I don't know about?"

For some reason obscure to Hardin, this frightened the fellow, for he tried to draw a pistol from the folds of his coat. Releasing his collar grip, Hardin seized the tow-head's arm, whirling him. The gun clattered to the boardwalk and the man's feet slipped as he was spun like a ball on the end of a string. He connected face first with the porch upright and carried it with him as he fell. The porch cracked ominously and sagged, then fell as the speaker hurriedly vacated his barrel.

The two hanging lanterns went out as they struck the mud, the cold water shattering the hot glass chimneys. Darkness folded around them and Hardin couldn't have broken up this gathering any better if he had used a scattergun. Parker, an old horse around trouble, pulled the blond man to his feet and kicked wreckage away so that he could stand. Blood dripped from the man's nose and a dozen cuts, but he had no broken bones. "To the jail," Hardin said and Parker hustled him across the street and down a block to the log building.

AFTER locking the door, Hardin motioned for the man to sit down, but he stubbornly refused, standing and glaring at the sheriff. This attitude irked Hardin, for he lived a hard life and put up with a lot. Without warning he speared the man with an

ax blow, driving him clear across the room where he sagged against the wall. Toeing a chair toward him, Hardin nodded to it and the blond man pulled himself into it, then sat there with his bleeding face in his hands.

"Just who are you?" Hardin asked. The man didn't answer, "You want another one?" The man raised his head. "This is a tough country, friend. Men get killed every week—in alleys, for their poke; in card games, when the old lady don't smile just right." He paused to pack and light his pipe. "You've given me a bad time, friend, and I don't like it. I don't like it a damn bit. What's your name?"

"Mailer," the man said.

"What do you do for a living, Mailer? Thug? Footpad?" Mailer made no reply. "Shake him down," Hardin said and Parker got rough with it. When the night marshal finished, Mailer stood in his red flannels, his clothes scattered over Hardin's desk.

"I'll kill you for this," Mailer said dully and meant it.

Parker went through the pockets, coming up with a pepper-box pistol and a sock full of buckshot, knotted in the toe. "Footpad," Parker said and threw the stuff in the drawer.

"What were you doing around Jethro Malloy's freight outfit?" Hardin asked.

"Looking for a job."

"Malloy says you were agitatin' the teamsters. You hit one of 'em like he says?"

"You think I'm a fool?" Mailer snapped. "I demand to be released!"

Hardin stared at the man for a long moment then his manner changed subtly. He pulled a chair around and faced the man. "You think we're stupid? That we can't keep track of all the transients in this town, but you got another guess coming. I can pin three killings on you, Mailer. A Copperhead and two anti-slavers. You ever see a man hang?"

"You don't scare me, Hardin," Mailer jeered. "Get tough with me and I've got friends to handle you. Better understand that."

"I understand that all ready," Hardin said. "I can go out there on the street and point a few out to you. They talk on one side for awhile, then

talk on the other. They don't have a side, Mailer, but they're waiting for it to break open and gut the country. You want to tell me about it, Mailer?"

The man gave a snorting laugh, then crossed his arms. Hardin sighed and nodded to Parker. "Lock him up."

When Parker came back, Hardin had his Dragoon Colt disassembled and was drying it. Sagging in a chair, Parker lighted a roapy cigar and rubbed his seamed face. "Beats me to figure a man like him," he said. "What's he hope to gain?"

"Money," Hardin said.

"He ain't Southern," Parker insisted. "Ain't a Northern man either, is he?"

"No," Hardin murmured and put his .44 back together. "He's neither. May not even be an American at all."

Parker had scratched a match to his cigar; now he paused with it half raised. "What?" He shook the match out and put the cigar back in his pocket.

"Nobody really wins in a war," Hardin told him. "The South knows that—so do the blue-bellies. Left alone—I'm talkin' about Oregon now—they'd maybe fight a little, but on the whole, she'd swing Union, same as California and Nevada Territory. California and Nevada has the gold. Oregon has the timber. Like I say, left alone, there wouldn't be too much trouble, but they're not being left alone. There's a group of men here who're working both ends against the middle all the time. Stirrin' 'em up continually. That's the bunch I'm after, Eli. I'll get 'em before I'm through."

"So you ride the fence, swingin' neither north or south." Parker smiled. "Which are you, Mel? Tell me the truth now."

"Texas is my home state," Hardin said. "Pure Dixie, Eli—pure Dixie."

"You're sure the devil for hidin' your sentiments then," Parker admitted.

"Wasn't elected to play one side," Hardin said. "I got a job all cut out for me and I'm goin' to do it, then if there's a war—who can say what I'll do? Maybe I'll go back and join up. Maybe I'll stay clear of it because it don't make a lot of sense to me—fightin' a fellow creature."

PARKER jerked his thumb toward the cell blocks. "You think he's a little bird in a big cage or a big bird?"

"Little bird," Hardin said. He took his Dragoon Colt out of the holster, removed the cylinder pin and pulled the loads. Recharging it with powder flask and cap box, he reassembled it. "Parker, who makes money when there's a war?"

"I never made nothin', that's sure," Parker said then gave it some thought. "That gun—had I enough of 'em I'd make a mint."

"Men who sell clothes and beef, and almost anything an army can use would make money." Hardin stood up and slipped his gun back into the holster. "Wars are easy to start, Eli—plenty easy."

"Been doin' some figurin'," Parker murmured. "I know you, Mel, and I'm wonderin' why you never caught this jasper when you was chasin' him. You could have, you know, instead of lettin' him give you the slip."

"That's right. I could have got him hung on the spot too, but I needed him alive and talking. That little fracas on the street was a stroke of luck." He put on his heavy coat then and started toward the door. "Stay close, Eli. I don't want him shot through the bars."

Giving the older man a thin smile, Hardin went out into the rain.

He cruised the streets for an hour, listening to the talk, hearing the arguments mount stronger and stronger. The rain slacked off after four and the cloud layer broke, allowing the feeble rays of a quarter moon to sift through.

Taking a cup of strong coffee in the Chinese restaurant pushed the sleep from his mind and he turned in to the side street when he saw the light in Jethro Malloy's store. Rapping on Malloy's door, Hardin waited a moment then heard Jethro's cautious footsteps. "Who is it?" Malloy wanted to know.

"Hardin. I want to talk to you." The heavy bar slid back and Malloy opened the door. Stepping inside, Hardin waited until the man rebolted

it, then said, "We caught the jasper who gave us the chase."

Malloy's face changed subtly, becoming sharply alert. "That's interesting, Mel. He identify himself?"

"Said his name was Mailer." Hardin crossed the room and sat down on a packing crate. "You connect him with anyone, Jethro? His friends? Anyone he was seen hanging out with?"

"No," Malloy said. "Should I?"

"I don't know. You were the one who wanted him caught."

"That's so," Malloy murmured and pawed his hand across his face. He studied Hardin carefully, then stood up and poured from a large coffee pot sitting on the pot-bellied stove. "I was hopping mad after the trouble." He handed the tincup to Hardin. "Turn him loose, Mel. I don't think there's anything to gain by preferring charges at this time."

"What's different about this time?" Mel murmured.

MALLOY slapped his thigh. "War's brewing, Mel. A lot of things happen then—spawned by a man's politics. Don't seem right to get a man hung because of what he believes."

"There's no war yet," Hardin insisted. "Either we have law here or we don't. I was counting on you to help me."

"I'm sorry," Malloy said and finished his coffee. He paused then and his voice dropped to a soft murmur. "You're Southern, aren't you?" He waved his hand. "Now don't put on an act for me, Mel. This is just between you and me."

"What difference would it make?" Hardin hedged. "The badge is neutral, Jethro."

"Neutral!" He said it in a disgusted voice. "You're the only man who can move around without arousing suspicion, Hardin. And you're a Southern man."

"You seem to know a lot about my politics," Mel said. "Maybe a little more than I know myself." He packed his pipe and got it drawing. "You got something on your mind, Jethro?"

"Maybe," Jethro said. "Mel, have

you ever thought of making a lot of money?"

"Everyman's dream," Hardin admitted. "Do I look different?"

Malloy paced up and down the room, then faced Hardin. "Which way is Oregon and California going to swing when the war's declared, Mel?"

"Union," Hardin said without hesitation. "You're a fool to think otherwise."

"Maybe I am," Malloy admitted. "But if so I'll be a rich one. I want you to let Mailer loose, Hardin. The man has been working for me."

"That's quite an admission," Hardin said softly. "You got a little ax you're grindin', Jethro?"

"That's neither here nor there," Malloy said. "I'll give you five hundred in specie to turn him loose tonight. Is it a deal?"

"No!"

Malloy tried not to lose his temper. "Man, you're Southern! What's the matter with you anyway?" Malloy offered Hardin a cigar and when the lawman declined, popped it into his mouth. He chewed the end soft then bent over the lamp for his light. "I wish I could trust you," Malloy said.

"Mailer stays in jail," Hardin told him and stood up. "Careful that you don't get in too deep now," he added and turned to the door.

"Wait!" Malloy came over and took him by the arm. "A thousand in gold. He can't be worth that much to you."

"He might talk," Hardin said softly. "Ever think of that? Then he'd be worth more." He smiled and slid the bar back. "What you haulin' in your wagons that's so all-fired important? Been makin' regular trips to California these past few months."

"Don't get too nosey," Malloy warned. "Just keep on arresting drunks and leave me alone. Better be smart and turn Mailer loose before morning."

Hardin opened the door, then shook his head. "Nice try—but the answer is still no." He closed the panel and walked down the dark street, his head down, deep in thought.

GOING back to the jail, he rapped on the door, identified himself and Eli Parker let him in. "Get Mailer out here," Hardin said and paced the room until Parker came back with the man.

Mailer's face showed some mottled bruises and one eye was greatly swollen. "Sit down," Hardin told him and the man complied after a brief hesitation. "So you work for Jethro Malloy?"

Nothing changed on Mailer's face, except the eyes. They narrowed for a moment then he said: "You're talkin' through your hat."

"You've been a busy boy," Hardin said. "What does Jethro haul in his wagons these days—guns?"

"Go ask him," Mailer said. "I don't know what the blazes you're talking about."

"You're not Southern," Hardin said. "What are you and what do you have to sell?"

"Nothing," Mailer insisted. "You get me up to ask a lot of dam-fool questions?"

Hardin sighed, then said: "Take him back and lock him up. Put him in that cell near the alley. I think his friends will worry about how much he'll say and if they worry enough, they may shoot him through the window to shut him up."

Mailer let his breath out in one gust. "Why—that's murder!"

"Take him away," Hardin said and showed no concern whatever.

"Damn you," Mailer began and Hardin spun on him, slapping him solidly.

"You're a dead man unless you talk!" Hardin said. "Malloy knows you've said plenty already because I filled his ear. He offered me a thousand in gold to turn you loose. Now that he knows I won't, it may be worth a bullet to shut you up." Hardin fisted a handful of the man's shirt and pulled him close. "You want to try that cell by the alley?"

Mailer licked his lips, then shook his head. "What does Malloy haul to California then?" Hardin asked.

"Cannon," Mailer said. "Whitworths, Napoleons—from France and England. They're beginning to blockade the Southern ports."

Hardin shoved, causing Mailer to fall back against the desk. "So they come through Portland, then down into California. You building an army?"

"Not me," Mailer said. "I—I'm merely a representative."

"Selling to both sides—" Hardin slapped his leg with a doubled fist. "War mongers—you don't care who wins, just so there's money to be made." He became openly angry then. "I'm going to break your filthy money-grabbing scheme wide open, Mailer! When I get through there won't be a square foot of land in the state safe enough for you." Hardin calmed himself. "Put him in the cell next to the alley, Eli."

"I talked!" Mailer wailed. "What more do you want?"

Hardin said nothing, just nodded and Parker shoved the man toward the rear of the building.

Entering Emma Rigeley's boarding house, Hardin tried to be quiet for he had no desire to wake her at this hour. He placed a frying pan on the stove and cooked himself a plate of eggs, but when he turned to set them on the table he found Emma framed in the doorway.

"Caught in the act," Hardin said and smiled. Emma wore a red robe pulled tightly about her and her hair was wrapped in a white cloth, tied in the front.

"Don't you ever sleep?" she chided. She took a chair across from him and folded her arms, not speaking again until he mopped the plate clean. "You're a troubled man, Mel."

"The world's full of trouble," he murmured.

"You don't have to shoulder it. Can you really win?"

"No," he admitted. "It's coming to a head and it scares me a little. All along I've smelled it in the wind and tried to hold them apart, appeasing one side then the other, but I'm through. My arm's getting tired." He ran his fingers through his thick hair and wrinkles appeared on his forehead. "I'm just one man, Emma—when it comes right down to it. I'm licked and am too stubborn to admit it."

EMMA WENT to the stove for two cups of coffee, then took her seat and studied him. Reaching across the table, she laid her hand on his and said: "Six years ago we came here in the same wagon train. There wasn't much of anything until we started to build. There was never any other man for me, Mel, but somehow we've never gotten around to talking about ourselves. Sometimes I wonder if we ever will."

"I thought there was some things we didn't have to talk about. We never needed much talk between us, Emma."

She slapped the table with her palm. "I want to get married, Mel! I wanted you to take land and raise crops, but you never did. I need something solid—someone with his feet down deep, like roots. That's what I wanted, but you never gave me that."

He blew out a long breath and cuddled the cup. "You're the builder, Emma—I've been the drifter. I don't have much to show for my six years."

"You built this building for me," Emma said. "Then I thought that you were settlin' down, but afterward you got restless. I couldn't hold you, Mel—you'd grow to hate the promises you made to me."

Hardin tapped the badge pinned to his shirt front. "You hate this, Emma?"

"Not hate," she said. She massaged her hands. "I don't know how to say it, Mel. It's just that time passes and you don't seem to be getting anyplace. You get shot at, cursed—I just don't know if you'll be alive tomorrow or not. Now you've got this—this other thing. After that it'll be something else."

"Each man has his job," Hardin said then turned his head as the front door slammed. A man's shape filled the doorway, then another crowded past him. Jethro Malloy flourished a Navy Remington and said: "Careful now, Hardin."

The man with Malloy came around by Hardin and lifted the .44 Dragoon from his holster. He patted Hardin and the lawman said: "Just one."

"Let's go, Mel," Malloy murmured and wiggled the muzzle of his gun.

"What about her?" the other man asked and nodded toward Emma, who remained immobile at the table.

"Leave her alone," Malloy said and Hardin scraped back his chair, then reached for his hat.

The man who had searched Hardin flourished the .44 and Mel went into the hall. Emma's slippers whispered on the bare floor as she rose to follow him but he said: "It's all right," and the words held her until he went out.

The rain had picked up again, a steady drizzle that came without a pushing wind. They splashed through the muddy street, made the board walk, then Malloy prodded Hardin with the gun. "Stop here."

The side of the street was dark and Malloy drew them in the shelter of a doorway. At the far end of the street a small riot began to form and gunshots punctured the night. Malloy said: "You won't stop it now, Hardin. You're way too late."

"You're forgetting about Parker," Hardin said. "Those shots will bring him on the run."

"Not tonight," Malloy said flatly. "He's dead."

MOVING down the street, men with torches bore white banners: LONG LIVE JEFFERSON DAVIS, painted in bright letters. Guns went off with explosive fury as the procession wound through the mud. Crowds lined the boardwalks, some jeering and shouting.

"How do you like it?" Malloy asked. "Nothing like a parade to get people stirred up over nothing." The first of the parades passed them and Hardin saw that there had been a lot of free whiskey in town because most of them were on the way to being drunk. Malloy nodded to the man with Hardin's gun and the man shot three times into the crowd.

If a stick of giant powder had been exploded, the result would not have been more devastating. Instantly, the marching men were transformed into a roaring, bloody mob, surging toward the walks and the men who jeered at them.

Immediately, two hundred men were fighting with knives, fists and guns. Hardin whirled on Malloy but the man batted him across the jaw with

the barrel. "Easy now—easy. You want to wake up dead?"

Hardin began to shake. "You do this for money?"

"A lot of money," Malloy said. "Nothing like starting a good war to make an honest dollar." He touched the man beside Hardin. "Go on and finish it now."

The man glanced up and down the street but no one noticed him, so eager were they to kill their neighbor. Hardin watched him slide along the wall, shot one man who got in his way, then disappear into the store three doors down.

"Going to have a little fire now," Malloy murmured. "In the morning the anti-slavers will blame it on the Southern boys and the Southerners will say the blue-bellies did it. Either way, I'll sell guns."

Someone in the street shot wildly, the lead dimpling the wood by Malloy's head. The man gave an involuntary start and Hardin was on him in that instant. He sledged the man heavily, a blow that drove Malloy to his knees, then they were wrestling for the gun. Malloy was no coward and he had a terrific strength, but Hardin was deliberately brutal. He kneed the man in the stomach, then used his fist like a setting maul, battering Malloy across the nose and eyes.

The Navy Remington fell to the walk and Hardin hit the man three times more, then Malloy dropped when the lawman released him. Snatching up the gun, Hardin rummaged through the man's pockets for shot and powder flask, but found nothing more than an extra loaded cylinder. Taking this, he left the doorway at a run, bowling two men down who got in his way.

INSIDE the store, Malloy's man had already fired the back room, for a wide glow began to spread. Down the street, the man ran across with a flaming broom and Hardin raised the gun, shooting once, then followed him as he disappeared between two buildings.

In the rear, he found that he was near the hardware store, then understood what the man was up to. Powder was stored in the back room and

the man was after it, probably lighting a fuse already.

Taking a station by a pile of old barrels, Hardin waited and listened to the din out on the streets. The sky held a bright patch to mark the burning building and unless the rain picked up, others would catch.

Minutes dragged by, then there was the flare of a match and a moment later the man came out. Raising the Remington, Hardin shot low and watched the man fold, a bullet lodged in his hip. When Hardin left his place of concealment, the man was trying to drag himself away from the door. Hardin's boots made almost no noise in the mud and he had the .44 in his hand before the man knew what happened. Rolling over, he stared at Hardin and his eyes were frightened. "Get me away from here!"

"You'll enjoy it," Hardin said and slipped the Dragoon in his own holster. He turned then and ran to the end of the alley, the man's cries following him until he turned the corner.

The blast shook the whole street, cascading flimsy store fronts to the mud. There was a wild shower of flying timbers that landed on a score of roofs, breaking through some to catch fire on the inside.

Already he had had enough, but in Hardin's mind there was little give and he had one more man to get before this was finished. He crossed the muddy street and went down another alley. Here, the shouting and noise was subdued and he moved carefully, knowing now that Malloy was deadly. There were others out there, men in that crowd, who took Malloy's money, but they were unimportant now. Only Malloy counted.

FIGURING the man would try to leave, Hardin edged along until he came to the stable, then let himself in the dark interior. The lamp over the arch still spread a faint glow but he deadened it with one swipe of his gun barrel. Taking a place in an empty stall, he waited, using this time to recharge his .44 Dragoon.

Out on the street, the light grew, a flickering light that threw long, jumpy shadows. The yelling seemed

more uniform now, somehow organized against this common disaster. This made him feel better, then he became alert as a shadow shifted and ran for the darkened arch.

Jethro Malloy paused, a thick shape there, then Hardin said: "Now it's just you and me and money don't matter."

Shooting on the heels of Hardin's words, Malloy outlined himself in the brief flare of the muzzle flash. Earing the hammer back, Hardin shot, the Dragoon's voice a jarring blast. Malloy was flung back and half around; he shot again in the mud, then fell heavily.

Leaving his place of concealment, Hardin crossed to him and threw the pistol Malloy gripped away. The man tried to raise himself, then weakness pulled him flat and a moment later, his breathing stopped.

The street was wild with sound as Hardin navigated the length of it; buildings burned fiercely. He came to the corner, then cut across, going directly to Emma Rigeley's.

She was in the parlor, waiting, nervous and afraid.

"We'll go away," he said. "I'm through. Tonight convinced me how finished I am. I don't want that mess out there, Emma. Let someone else have it."

"Don't say that because you know I want to hear it, Mel." She put her arms around him and held him. "Mean it or don't say it. I never want to hurt you."

"Better go pack your things," he said. "They may not save the town."

He waited for her, listening to the sounds coming from down the street. The things he had believed in didn't mean much to him anymore. Maybe someday it would be different, but at this point in their development at least, men were not ruled by law, they were still ruled by primitive emotions. Hardin had applied himself logically, but against things that knew no logic. He understood now that the town would burn down and that it would be rebuilt—probably only to have another Malloy come along and do it all over again.

Taking the back door, Hardin went to the barn and harnessed the team, then drove the wagon to the porch. Emma came out with two bundles and said: "I won't need much. A few pots and pans in the kitchen, if you want to get them."

He hopped down and she touched him; it was a long kiss, satisfying and lasting. "No mistake, Mel?"

Smiling, he murmured, "If it is, I should have made it a long time ago."

●END

THE SQUAW SPEAKS by W. K. PUTNEY

AT THE TURN of the present century, graduates of the famous Indian school, Carlisle, would return to their tribes and revert to tribal ways of living and speech. About the same time there was an influx of dishonest shopkeepers who thought that the Indians were so ignorant they made good prey for high prices and inferior goods. Lieutenant Colonel Pratt used to tell some very amusing stories about the educated Indians and those dishonest shopkeepers.

At a certain Indian Agency of the Midwest, one of these shady traders saw an Indian squaw, wrapped in her blanket, enter. She browsed around his store and looked at various articles. After each look, she would ask, "How muchee?"

The price was stated by the eager

shopkeeper. In each case it was far higher than it should have been. Finally she drew her blanket tight, looked at him with sharp eyes and said,

"Do you not regard such prices as extortionate? These articles are palpably and unmistakably of inferior quality. Do you not believe that a reduction in your charges would materially enhance your pecuniary profits? I beg of you to seriously consider my suggestion."

Then she stalked out of his shop and the shopkeeper sat down in a chair completely bewildered. And he never again tried to fleece an "ignorant Indian" after he learned that she was educated at the Carlisle Indian School.

●END

ROPE'S END

by BEN LENES

THE DAMP-ENED fire, brushed by a soft morning wind, billowed grey smoke from charred mesquite wood. The young peeler gulped thin lukewarm coffee from a tin cup. Upturning the unfinished coffee, he mashed his boot heel restlessly into the fire wood.

The smell of burnt wood crowded out from his nostrils the pine air; he knew this to be good. While he was fully rigged and equipped, and supplied with enough water and food, he welcomed nature's assistance in any form. Unless the clear morning air was tainted, that uncanny black stallion would smell a human being a

mile away.

The horse gentler tightened his sleeping equipment behind his saddle, against its cantle. Swiftly he mounted the bay, testing the spring in his arms and legs. The shadow of a pine was a cold weight on his neck.

He expounded the simple plan to his horse, his closest partner in this business.

"We'll run this wild one down to his rope's end, till he's too doggoned tired to buck us."



This wild one they would run down to his rope's end, till he was too dead tired to buck them...

He urged the bay quietly out of the shadows, peered in all directions, leaving to intuition the course down the slope.

"We'll find him again." He rubbed his cold hands. "Must be plenty tired. How many more miles can he go on with so little food and water?"

He smoothed his palm over the cold canteens, anxiously awaiting the next scheduled drink. "If we can't outrun him, we'll outstick him. Limey ravines and dried cactus aren't gonna help him any. I'll stop him in a box canyon, on a mesa edge, or somethin'. I'll get him."

He felt the horn for the two hanging lariats. Words that had been spoken by fellow ranch hands rang angrily in his ears. The wrangler had advised. "Give it up, kid. Six years breakin' wild horses is good work. What's another catch! Time you got out of a rough game and retired to cowpunchin'."

The peeler had answered him.

"You're not kiddin' me, I don't give a hoot what all of you say. You don't think I can do it. I'm willin' to make a bet, any size. Sure, I had enough of bustin' the wild ones. But I want this devil and I aim to get him."

The cook had winked to him. "Don't come back without that black phantom."

Every man had a calling he must answer to, he told the cooksie. "Maybe I'll come back without him. But I'm gonna give it an honest try."

These thoughts singed his nerves. He muttered, "I won't quit till I put him in the remuda."

He coddled his horse along a ravine, up the slope of a hill and through the pink and green of owl's clover and primrose until his eyes ranged over the mesa. Far ahead the black mustang's head cut up and down across the horizon. He prodded his horse forward and watched the stallion head for the rich lower grasslands. The cowboy followed the wild horse down. Within fifty yards of the black, he stopped to watch the handsome animal crop grass.

He had a need for talk, even to himself. He shook his head in admiration. "Sure is a king."

Sight of the long gray scar lined across the strong black quarter pained the cowboy. He saw the seared flesh and burned mane and the pitted legs and hip bones and he shook his head again, with dismay this time. *How many lions jumped you? How many rocks tore at your skin? How many fires scorched you? How many men chased you till they keeled over dead tired?*

His rested bay stood erect; he held the hemp rope high. The wild stallion stopped, turned a semi-circle, looked bewildered and then leaped forward and away. The bay rushed after him. The peeler flashed his lariat as he neared the stallion. The gap between them remained constant and he held his throw.

Beyond the fleeing horse stood the obstruction the cowboy needed. Suddenly the black stallion stopped, ten yards from the barbed wire fence. He

turned, cut left, cut right, ducked away from the suddenly flying noose.

Then, whirling cleverly, he was pounding his hooves straight for his pursuer with renewed speed and vigor. The mustang rose on his hind legs, leaped at the bewildered cowboy. He hoofed his enemy's saddle apron, so that the gentle bay lost footing, and the cowboy and his mount thudded to the soft earth. The stallion reeled then and fled, neighing, whimpering, moaning.

The peeler remounted, grasped a second coiled rope, and hounded the mustang again. He watched the stallion once more rear up before the wire fence. The trapped animal, confused, turned and ran straight towards his pursuers again, then stopped suddenly and reversed his direction. He whined as he galloped quickly toward the wire fence.

The young horseman sat frozen. He could have resumed the chase, but the fury and the violence of the long-sought wild one held him transfixed.

The angry stallion, never turning left, never turning right, now rushed headlong into the barbed wire fence. The wires snapped, resounding like a thousand breaking harp strings, beating a terrible discord with the horse's anguished cries. The stallion stumbled forward, somersaulted, fell heavily on his back. And then lay quivering.

The cowboy swung down, went close enough to see that the eye whites were now blazing red. Blood flowed from gashes in the chest, neck and head. He approached, knelt down, touched the trembling muscles.

Tenderly, he ran his fingers over a bald skin spot. Choked up inside, he murmured stifled words. "Grand old horse—champion of your herd. No need to be scared of me. I'll take good care of you. Nothing to be ashamed of, fella..."

While the sun warmed and dried the earth, the peeler spaded a long rectangular slot in the ground close by the gasping mustang. He watched the life ebb out and a shadowy guilt engulfed him. ●END



THE GRIEF AND THE GLORY

JOSEPH
by PAYNE
BRENNAN

The men Wesley Elison
killed simply weren't able
to let him alone...



EVERYBODY in Cross Flats knew Dick Farringer for what he was—a loud, vain, lazy braggart, forever trying to convince people that he was a dangerous badman. Dick had started acting like he was a second Billy the Kid when he was just a lanky stable boy with nothing but fuzz on his face.

None of us paid much attention to it at the time; we thought it was funny, sometimes, and we laughed about it when we met at the bars. We all figured that Dick would grow out of it. That it was just one of those peculiar stages youngsters often go through.

But Dick killed a man—and from then on his act became a permanent part of him. Dick was only seventeen at the time. He'd gotten hold of a second-hand .45 with a split stock and he was swaggering down the main street one day with the big gun in a holster on his thigh when some drunk swayed out of Morgan's Saloon and started up the street toward him.

When the drunk saw Dick, he started to laugh. He just stood there in the road, pointing at Dick and laughing real hard with his head thrown back. He was drunk enough to think that Dick looked pretty funny—and he was too drunk to understand what effect his guffaws were having on the kid.

Dick told him to shut up and the drunk laughed all the louder. Then Dick called him a dirty name and the drunk went for his gun. Too late. He was so full of redeye he couldn't draw fast and even though he finally cleared his holster, it didn't do him any good. Dick's first shot crashed into his chest before he got his own gun pointed straight. He slumped in the road there and Dick sent another slug into him as he went down.

Nobody blamed Dick—much. After all, the drunk had started the trouble. And he had reached first. But some folks said Dick should have had more sense. They said he should have pretended he didn't notice the drunk. Just kept on walking and not bothered. After all, they pointed out, Dick *did* look sort of ridiculous strutting down the street like a turkey gobbler with that gun strapped to his leg.

Anyway, that killin' confirmed Dick in his role as badman. As most of us looked at it, it wasn't much of an accomplishment. Almost anybody can draw and shoot fast enough to beat the play of a man so drunk he can hardly find his own holster. Some *real* killers would even refuse to shoot a man like that. They'd consider it was beneath them. When a bleary-eyed drunk tried to draw on them, they'd just reach over easy like and slap the barrel of their gun alongside his head. That finished the business, and it made the drunk look like no end of a fool.

But Dick made the most of *his* drunk. If he was acting before, he wasn't afterward. He took himself dead serious. And the trouble was, in another year or two, he began to look the part a little better. He grew a couple of inches and he started to fill out.

Besides that, he started to dress so you couldn't help but take notice of him. He bought a fringed buckskin hunting coat, with colored beads and painted porcupine quills sewn into it. He bought a big white sombrero and a pair of embroidered boots. And he let his hair grow so long it finally fell clear down over his shoulders—like Wild Bill Hickok's.

Even though we all knew he was a fake badman, you had to admit that he made quite an eye-catching spectacle. When a tenderfoot came to town, he figured Dick Farringer must be a real dyed-in-the-wool two-gun killer.

One such tenderfoot was a little scrawny runt of a kid named Reeve Hunt. Nobody knew much about him. He just appeared in town one dusty summer's day and most of us figured he'd sneaked away from a wagon train which was known to be passing through a few miles up north.

REEVIE was only a hair over five feet and he was so thin and starved lookin' you half expected to see daylight shinin' through him. I'd guess he was sixteen, but he might have been fifteen, or seventeen. It was hard to say.

Reeve drifted around town, aimless like, for a few days, sleepin' in

stables and sweepin' the boardwalks in front of some of the stores for the price of a meal. Finally he got a regular job at Les Shanning's Lucky Lode saloon. He swept the floors early in the morning, emptied the spittoons, lugged out empty bottles and tidied up in general. Les didn't pay him over four or five dollars a week, but it was enough to keep beans and biscuits in his belly. He couldn't afford the price of a regular room, so he just went on sleepin' in haymows and empty stalls around town.

Well, one morning when Reeve was finishing up his chores in the Lucky Lode, Dick Farringer swaggered inside and ordered a drink. Dick was wearin' his beaded buckskin coat and his embroidered boots. And, as always, he had a big black .45 strapped to his leg.

When little Reeve saw him standin' there at the bar in his fancy duds, with his yellow hair hangin' down over his shoulders, he dropped his broom and just stood there bug-eyed. His eyes started shinin' and a kind of light came over his face. You could tell right away that Dick Farringer was Reeve's idea of what a real six-shootin' hero ought to be.

Dick went right on drinkin' and didn't pay any attention to him, but from that day on Reeve became his shadow. After he'd finished his morning chores in the Lucky Lode, Reeve would roam around town until he found Dick Farringer. From then on, he'd follow Dick all day long and well into the evenin'.

He'd usually trail Dick at a respectable distance, and once in a while Dick would go someplace where Reeve couldn't follow. But, most times, whenever you saw Dick Farringer, you saw little Reeve Hunt not far behind. Reeve watched his every move, and it wasn't hard to guess that Reeve just about worshipped the swaggerin' loafer with the long hair and the beaded buckskin coat.

Dick soon caught on that little Reeve was taggin' along after him, but he didn't seem to mind. Probably it made him feel more like a real badman, realizin' that saucer-eyed kid was so took with him he spent nearly

the whole day sneakin' along in his tracks.

Well, this had been goin' on for a couple of months, when one afternoon Dick strutted into the Lucky Lode and started drinkin'. He drank more than usual and the more he drank the more he bragged. He said he could out-draw any man in town and that there wasn't a one of them dast stand up to him. He boasted about the drunk he'd killed and he hinted pretty plain that he didn't intend stoppin' there.

THE ONLY person in the Lucky Lode impressed by this talk was little Reeve Hunt who'd slipped through the swing doors not long after Dick barged in. Reeve sat in a corner with his colt eyes glued on Dick. There wasn't any doubt that he believed every word that came out of Dick's mouth.

Some of the rest of us were pretty peeved by Dick's loud-mouthed braggin'. And I think two or three of the customers in the Lucky Lode were sore tempted to call Dick's bluff. But common sense kept their hackles from risin' too high. Most of us still figured Dick as nothing but an overgrown kid, and I don't think anybody wanted to kill him. And you couldn't very well draw on a kid like Dick and then just shoot his hat off for a scare. About the same time his hat flew off, you'd be apt to hit the floor a corpse.

Finally someone mentioned that Wesley Elison had been seen in near-by Brutonville.

At that, Dick banged his whiskey glass on the bar and sneered openly. "Why that tinhorn! He better stay away from here! There ain't room enough in this town for him and me!"

We sort of exchanged glances then, and we knew that redeye was really beginnin' to simmer inside Dick's belly.

Wesley Elison had killed not one man but at least a half dozen and he was known all through the county as a cool and deadly hand with a sixgun.

Les Shanning, tending bar at the time, leaned over and touched Dick's arm. "Better be careful what you say about Wesley, boy. He don't scare very easy! He heard what you said—he might sort of take exception to it!"

Dick glared at him. "I ain't afraid of Wesley Elison! I still say this town ain't big enough for the two of us! He crawls in here, I'll tell him so!"

The whiskey was really singin' in Dick. His eyes were bloodshot and he was starting to sway a little. We tried to shift the talk to something else, but Dick wouldn't have it. He kept drinkin' and braggin' and every few minutes he'd get back to Wesley Elison.

Finally he must have decided that the crowd in the Lucky Lode wasn't a good enough audience. He threw down a final drink and left.

We waited until little Reeve trailed out after him, and then we said what we'd been thinkin'. Most of it wasn't what you'd call complimentary.

Les Shanning shook his head. "Dick's lucky most of us knew him when he was a young'un. A stranger now, mightn't listen so peaceable."

When we drifted out of the Lucky Lode, about grub time, we figured Dick had probably gone to his room to sleep off his drinks.

But he hadn't. He was still struttin' around town, drinkin' and tellin' folks what a downright dangerous character he was. And he hadn't stopped makin' unneighborly remarks about Wesley Elison.

Little Reeve was still followin' him around, expectin' something to break loose, so excited he looked as if he'd bust.

LATER ON, most of us headed back for the Lucky Lode. Dick hadn't shown up there since he'd left in the afternoon, so as the evening wore on we began to forget about him.

Then Wesley Elison walked in.

You wouldn't think he was a killer. He looked more like a respected ranch foreman, or maybe a mine owner just traveling through. He wore a plain corduroy riding jacket, a flat-topped black hat and a black string tie. Judgin' by his squarish, sober-lookin' face, he was more cut out for business than killin'. But there couldn't be any mistakin' him. Nearly everybody in the Lucky Lode knew who he was.

Wesley was the kind of killer that sort of had the role pushed onto him.

To start out with, he'd shot a couple of men in a scrap over some stolen horses. Nobody knew all the details, but quite a few folks said Wesley was pretty much in the right. Anyway, after that, he was a marked man. One of the men he'd killed had some little reputation as a gunfighter. As a result, Wesley, you might say, inherited the crown. And once he got it, he had to go on defendin' it. It was an old familiar pattern but it still held. There was always some glory-greedy fool hankerin' to outdraw a good gunman. And the fool never figured the grief that went with the glory.

Wesley walked up to the bar and ordered a drink just like anybody else, but you could see his eyes sweep the room pretty carefully before he turned his back on it. Everybody went right on drinkin' and talkin', not payin' him any particular attention, because that wouldn't have been polite.

When Les Shanning slid over his second drink, Wesley caught his eye. "Know a kid around here named Dick Farringer? Heard somebody down at the liv'ry stable say he was fixin' to send me packin', case I showed up."

Right away Les began to sweat. Nobody in the Lucky Lode would have told Wesley about Dick's braggin', but already someone at the stables had talked. The cat was out of the bag.

Les shrugged uncomfortably. "The kid just got likkered up a little. Talks too much. Don't mean half he says."

Wesley stared moodily into his drink. "No, they never mean half they say. But once they say it, the wheel's started to spin."

We looked at him. His face appeared drawn and tired, but in spite of that his expression was calm. Calm and tired but alert.

He went on drinkin' then, and didn't say much more, but you could tell he was watchful.

An hour or so passed and we were beginnin' to think Dick Farringer had blustered himself out and gone home to bed. Wesley seemed a little less on edge up at the bar and the general tension had begun to relax.

Just about the time Les Shanning had stopped glancing toward the doors, they swung open to admit Farringer.

Wesley looked around, sort of froze

for a second, very slowly let go of his glass and turned until he faced the doors. You could see right away that he knew who Dick was. I doubt that he had ever seen him before, but he must have heard about the embroidered boots, the beaded coat and the long yellow hair.

DICK GOT halfway across the saloon toward the bar before he noticed the sudden silence and stopped. His eyes darted around, and he saw Wesley. It looked to me as if he turned white. Anyway he stood there motionless with a shocked look on his pale face.

Just then little Reeve Hunt edged through the swing doors. When he saw Dick standing alone in the middle of the floor, he stopped and stood staring.

Wesley's voice was quiet, conversational you might say. "You're Farringer," he said. "Heard you aimed to chase me out of town."

Dick stood there silent. Once his tongue flicked over his lips and that was all. He looked dazed and sick, as if the effects of his drinks were wearin' off and this climax had come at the worst possible time.

Wesley's voice was sharp when he spoke again. A kind of sudden savage impatience seemed to be crowding his words.

"All right, boy!" he said. "Start your play—or crawl out of here!"

For a long breathless half minute Dick just stood there. In spite of all his swagger and windy braggin', I think some of us felt sorry for him in that moment. He knew that Wesley would kill him if he went for his gun—and yet the thought of backing down was agony to him. When the tension seemed unbearable, when it seemed that either man must instantly shatter it with a sudden gunshot, Dick turned abruptly and headed toward the doors. After he pushed through, it was so silent inside you could hear his footsteps fading down the boardwalk.

Turning back to the bar, Wesley slid his glass toward Les Shanning. "Yellow but sensible," he said. "Ain't many back down like that. Thought sure I'd have to kill him."

He threw down the glass of whis-

key and with that gesture appeared to dismiss the incident from his mind.

About that time we remembered little Reeve Hunt. Reeve stood near the doors like a thunderstruck statue. He stared bewildered, unbelieving, as if his eyes had witnessed an action which his mind told him was an impossibility. He kept looking from Wesley's back to the still thrumming swing doors, as if he expected some immediate sequel to the encounter which had just taken place.

Finally, when nothing further happened, he looked around at the rest of us with a hurt, pleading look in his big saucer eyes. His expression reminded me of a dog's that has just been kicked by its master—for no reason at all. There was nothing sensible we could say to him and so we didn't say anything.

All of a sudden a kind of fright came over him. It looked like real terror in his eyes. He turned and ran out of there, wildly.

IN THE DAYS that followed we felt a lot sorrier for little Reeve than we did for Dick Farringer. Dick sobered up in more ways than one and for quite a spell he didn't do any more braggin'. But he still went around in his fake badman get-up, and he began making up excuses—small at first but getting bigger—about his crawfish act that night at the Lucky Lode.

But little Reeve Hunt was crushed. All the life and spirit seemed to have sapped away from him. He did his morning chores in the Lucky Lode as if he were sleep-walking, and he didn't speak a word. He began to act more like an old man than a kid.

We couldn't quite figure out what he felt toward Dick now that he'd seen his hero turn tail. He didn't follow Dick around town anymore, but whenever Dick was nearby, we saw little Reeve watching him.

None of us was sure what Reeve was thinkin' when he looked at Dick. It was a different look from before, and yet there didn't seem to be any hate, any malice, in it. In a way it was almost an accusin' look—yet it was more sorrowful than anything, sympathetic and sorrowful and sad.

The first green wonder of kid worship was gone, but some part of it lingered, some kind of *loyalty*, subdued but still burning.

We all thought Reeve would get over his hurt in time. But he didn't. He went on brooding day after day. Nothing seemed to raise his spirits. Les Shanning gave him a two-dollar increase in pay and the rest of us chipped in and bought him some new clothes, but our efforts had little effect. He thanked us all right, and I think he meant it, but that was all. His spirits didn't lighten.

One evening a good three months after his former visit, Wesley Elison rode into town again. After he'd left his horse at the stables, and bought himself a meal at the Circle House, he came into the Lucky Lode.

None of us was worried. We figured Dick Farringer had learned his lesson and, besides that, we knew Wesley wasn't the kind of gunman who growls around crowding trouble. If you let him alone, he'd come and go peaceable. The men he'd killed hadn't been able to let him alone.

Wesley was a little edgy at first, just like he always was I guess after he first came into a saloon, but Les Shanning began making light friendly talk to him and pretty soon he acted as if he was as relaxed as the rest of us.

The evening was well along, and Wesley was drinkin' easy at the bar, when somebody yelled "*Elison!*" so loud we all jumped.

It was little Reeve. He'd slid through the doors so silent-like nobody heard him. He had a big, rusty-lookin' .45 stuck under his belt and he stood starin' at Wesley Elison with eyes that seemed on fire. He should have looked ridiculous, laughable—but he didn't. Something about the appearance of that white-faced, scrawny kid standing there with a rusty gun under his belt and his eyes on fire made us feel creepy.

WESLEY had whirled around when he heard his name called, and now he stood watching Reeve with a puzzled frown on his face.

Before he thought of anything to say, Reeve walked forward a few feet and spoke again.

"I aim to shoot you," he said, looking directly at Wesley. "I'm countin' three and then I'm shootin'."

Wesley looked from little Reeve's thin, pasty face to the rusty .45 stuck under his belt. His frown relaxed. "Go on home to yore maw, kid," he said. "You don't scoot through that door, I'll whale the daylight out of you."

Wesley's words didn't make Reeve mad or embarrassed. They didn't have any effect on him at all. It was just as if he was deaf.

"I'm countin'," he said. "One."

Wesley's frown tightened up again. "Look, sonny," he said, "you make me mad enough I'll boot you through that door and clean out of town."

"Two," said Reeve.

It looked as if Wesley was just about to lunge forward and grab the kid, but he hesitated another instant and in that tiny fraction of time Reeve said "Three!" and reached for his rusty gun.

We always figured that Wesley's next move was a kind of automatic one, almost a reflex action you might say. His muscles moved before his mind had time to consider the matter.

His right hand dropped and lifted in a single movement and his six-gun roared. It looked, even then, as if he tried to aim low, but Reeve was a good eight to ten inches shorter than the kind of target Wesley was used to, and the slug that might have hit a big man in the upper thigh caught Reeve square in the belly. He jerked backward and spun around as if a horse had kicked him. For just a second or two he teetered on his feet; then he sank to the floor.

His rusty .45 was still stuck under his belt; he hadn't even managed to pull it free when Wesley's bullet hit him.

We all crowded up around Reeve but we could tell right away there wasn't anything we could do. In spite of the fact that we all knew he would bleed to death in a matter of minutes, three or four customers ran out to see if they could locate Doc Milliman anywhere around town. Les Shanning, meanwhile, took a horse blanket from behind the bar and covered the kid.

We thought Reeve was uncon-

scious but suddenly he opened his eyes and tried to talk. We bent down to catch his words. Finally he managed to whisper.

"Tell Dick," he said, "I—warn't afraid."

Those were his only words. A half minute later he was dead.

We were still standing around holding our hats when Doc Milliman hurried in. Although we told him he was too late, he went over and lifted the blanket. He just shook his head and sighed and dropped the blanket.

All this time Wesley Elison stood like a statue with his back to the bar, a shocked look on his face. He spoke only once and that was to ask if the kid had folks in town. When we told him no, he didn't say anything more.

WE WRAPPED little Reeve in the blanket and carried him over to Doc Milliman's back room for the night. Before another half hour had passed, just about everyone in town knew what had happened. Some of the boys were pretty mad and there was even talk of a necktie party.

When we got back to the Lucky Lode, Wesley Elison was still there. In spite of all the mutterin', Wesley, I guess, just wasn't the kind to run.

He was standing at the bar where we'd left him. He was facing it now, though, and he wasn't wastin' much time between drinks.

Most of the rest of us stayed back at the poker tables. We were sitting there, not sayin' much, wonderin' when Wesley would decide to clear out, when Dick Farringer stepped through the doors.

He didn't swagger in, as he used to do, he just walked in slow and stood there.

Wesley glanced around and then went back to his drinkin'. You'd think he hadn't even seen Dick.

It was plain to us as soon as we saw him that Dick had been pretty well shaken up by the news of little Reeve's death. And we figured that someone had sure enough told him Reeve's last words.

There was a strange expression on Dick's face, an expression we'd never seen before. Maybe it was just that for the first time in his life he'd forgotten about himself and started

thinkin' about someone else. Too late this time.

When Dick finally spoke, there wasn't any doubt about who he was directin' his words at.

"You killed Reeve," he said, "and now I'm killin' you. This time I'm not runnin'."

Wesley set down his drink. He turned, and there was a kind of weary patience in his voice.

"I don't know what that kid was to you," he said. "I'm right sorry I shot him. Didn't mean to. Didn't want to. But I did. When somebody starts to draw on me, I stop thinkin' and shoot."

He lifted his arm and wiped his forehead with his sleeve. "Now get out of here."

Dick dropped his hand to the butt of his .45, not fast, but deliberate-like.

We all expected to hear the roar of Wesley's six-gun an instant later, but it didn't come. For the first time in his life probably, he replied to that gesture with words instead of with a lead slug.

"You can't get the kid back that way," he said evenly. "There's been enough killin'. Get drunk and sleep on it." His voice was tired; there was almost a pleading not in it.

But it had no effect on Dick Farringer. Dick hadn't tried to lift his gun, but his hand remained on the butt.

He spoke again. "If you don't draw, I'll kill you anyway. I'll kill you the way you are."

Wesley didn't seem much affected by what Dick said, but he stared across at him and he must have read something in Dick's eyes which told him that words would have no effect.

The next instant it happened as we had feared it would.

Wesley's hand dipped and lifted in that impossible blur of movement and the crash of his gun seemed to come in the same instant.

Dick slued on his feet and was hit but he didn't go down and even as he reeled sideways his own gun was out and he fired back.

His aim was high, but dead center. The big .45 slug hit Wesley in

the throat. He toppled backward and he must have been dead before he struck the floor. We learned later that the bullet pierced his windpipe and went on through to smash his backbone.

Somebody ran over and helped Dick to a chair. When we cut away his shirt, we saw that Wesley's slug had ripped away a piece of hide and scraped a rib under Dick's left armpit. Somebody ran out for Doc Milliman again and meanwhile we held a clean towel against the wound to stop the bleeding. It was a nasty enough scratch, but not a real bad one, and barring infection there was little to worry about. In a few minutes Doc Milliman puffed back in and bandaged it up.

WHEN DOC finished pressing on the last piece of tape, Dick got up and we helped him put on a new shirt which someone had brought in.

He looked around at us then. "Where'd they take Reeve?"

When we told him Reeve was in Doc Milliman's back room, he turned and walked out of the Lucky Lode, Doc Milliman trailing after him.

We never saw Dick Farringer again. Later, Doc told us what happened.

He said Dick went into the room where Reeve lay, stood looking down at him and said in a kind of soft voice Doc Milliman had never heard him use before: "All right, Reeve."

Then he turned, put on his hat and went out the door. The stable boys said later that he came into the livery barn with saddlebags and a small pack, asked for his horse, paid his bill and rode away. He didn't just ride away from town either; from what we could learn he didn't stop in any of the neighboring towns. He just kept on going right out of the county. He rode right out of our lives for good.

Well, that's the story, I guess, and maybe it makes sense and maybe it doesn't. The day after Dick rode away, we buried little Reeve and Wesley Elison on the hill overlooking town. The kid and the killer, buried near together up there.

Sometimes at night, ridin' past the hill, with the stars shinin' down, you get a funny sort of feelin', and you wonder if things do make sense. Little Reeve with his big saucer eyes and his crazy hero worship never deserved to die. You feel pretty sorry for the kid, lyin' up there before his life had hardly begun.

And then when you get to thinkin' about it, you feel sorry for Wesley Elison too. He hadn't wanted to be a killer in the first place—just had the part pushed onto him. And he'd got caught up in the business with Dick Farringer more or less by accident. He wasn't a mean man, but he'd got started in a pattern he couldn't break out of. Like the wheel he'd mentioned, that started to spin and

couldn't be stopped.

A lot of us felt that he didn't intend to kill Dick Farringer that last night. We felt that his aim had been bad on purpose. Of course it could be argued that he was pretty shaken up by killin' little Reeve and for that reason missed killin' Dick. We'll never know.

Anyway, when we ride past that hill, some of us like to think that maybe there is a mite of sense in the business after all. We like to hope that little Reeve and Wesley Elison didn't die for nothing at all.

We like to think that, somewhere, Dick Farringer is no longer a braggart in a beaded coat, but a real man, a real hero to maybe a lot of kids—kids like little Reeve. ● END

GIRL IN THE NIGHT

(continued from page 35)

such a fool," Marian sobbed against the handsome young man's chest. That was where he was cradling her head, not excited about it or anything, like he was used to it.

"Golly, I don't blame you for running away," Rod Anderson said, all that calm, mature way, like he was forty-five or something instead of maybe twenty-five. He addressed Jack particularly then. "You see, Mr. Lally, Marian came out from the East a few months ago to marry me, and the life out here was just too tough for her, and we kind of got to quarreling—"

"And because I was a good-for-nothing baby, I ran away." Marian wasn't sobbing now; she said this with a very determined, stiff underlip. And she suddenly put her beautiful head on one side and put her beautiful big eyes on Jack, and she said, "I don't know how I'm ever going to repay you, Mr. Lally. Because if it hadn't been for you—"

Jack started to speak but it wouldn't work until he cleared his throat and even then his voice was pretty hoarse.

"Heck, that wasn't nothin'," he husked.

"Gosh, yes, Mr. Lally," Rod Anderson said earnestly. "You've got to let

us do something big for you—"

Jack Lally had tilted his stetson back and was scratching his head violently, and he looked down at the stranger still out cold at his feet. "Reckon I'd better be luggin' this one into town; hand him over to the sheriff—"

"No reason you should have to bother with that," Rod Anderson said. "I'll take the fellow in as we—"

"T's okay," Jack Lally said. He swung the limp stranger up over one shoulder like a sack of potatoes, letting the man's head hang almost to the ground. Jack grinned very broadly at Rod and Marian. "Well, be seein' you," he said, and then he winked, "like's not, there'll be a nice fat reward out for this critter..."

Easing his horse down the slope ten minutes later with its extra load, trailing his prisoner's animal, Jack Lally at first tried to keep his mind blank, it was spinning around anyhow, but finally he couldn't help thinking about it all...

"You've got to come see us in Cool Creek, Mr. Lally," she'd insisted. "So we can entertain you royally."

Jack shook his head with a quick little laugh. "Man-oh-man," he said aloud. "Can't a fellow get the blamed-est ideas sometimes though?" ● END

SODBUSTER'S WOMAN

by ED LA VANWAY

Ben Clayton would never have killed a man over land. This time, though, the Purdue boys had molested his wife....

A STOCKY one with sandy hair and blue eyes that bore the look of a man resigned to hard work and trouble, Ben Clayton was on the back porch washing up when he saw the three riders coming down the dusty road. It was arrogant pug-nosed old Martin Purdue and his two sons, Lew and Floyd.

Ben Clayton stood a moment, accepting the inevitable, and then, hanging up the towel and forgetting to comb his hair, he walked dejectedly half the length of the porch and turned into the kitchen.

To his wife Harriet, who stood at the stove cooking the breakfast side-meat and eggs, Ben said, "Lew and Floyd are bringing the old man along this time."

A slender woman with brown hair, large brown eyes and high-standing breasts, Harriet glanced sidewise at her husband, her cheeks flushed with the heat of the stove.

"What are we going to do, Ben?"

"Not much we can do, honey. We made our mistake when we settled here where there's none of our kind of people."

Walking heavily on through the house and into the bedroom, Ben Clayton picked up his gunbelt, which hung from a post of the brass bedstead. He buckled it around his hard middle, but even as he did so, Ben knew he would not use the .45 Peace-maker the holster contained. He wouldn't, he knew, shoot it out with the Purdues. He would kill no man over land.

Ben went out onto the front porch, and he heard Harriet's light footsteps in the living room as she followed him.

"Let me face them alone, honey. I don't want them to get the idea I'm trying to hide behind my wife's skirts."

"I want to talk to Martin Purdue," Harriet said. "I want him to know the way Lew and Floyd..."

"Want him to know what?"

"If Martin Purdue is any man at all..." Harriet began, but again she broke off. She was gazing now at the hard, cruel set of the elder Purdue's face, and it told her that an appeal to Lew and Floyd's father would be futile.

The Purdues, reining off the road and into the edge of the yard, pulled up, touching their hatbrims. Then pug-nosed old Martin Purdue said arrogantly, "Clayton, you folks be off W Diamond range inside a week. Hear me?"

Ben Clayton said, "That's mighty little time, Martin."

"Time enough."

Ben watched the belligerent old cowman in thwarted silence.

Martin Purdue laid a deliberate look at the weapon strapped around Ben Clayton and then he reached a gnarled hand suggestively to the jutting butt of his own six-shooter.

"Load up and pull out, or get ready to make your fight," he said. "I ain't just talking."

"Ain't you going to allow me nothing for my buildings? Or these trees I've set out? Or the work I done on that water ditch?"

Martin Purdue said, "You ain't got anything the W Diamond can use. After you're gone, we'll set these here buildings afire. Hell, no, I won't allow you nothing. Expect me to?"

"Well," Ben said, "it would be only fair to pay me a little something for the lumber and my work."

The younger Purdues, Lew and Floyd, both slim men with dark hair and pug noses like their father, had their eyes on Ben's wife. They were leering at her slender, high-breasted figure hungrily, in a fashion that

would have made Ben's blood boil had he not been keeping his own gaze fixed on the pot-gutted old range hog.

"But being Martin Purdue," Ben continued, "you can't see it that way. You ain't the sort to give a man a fair shake."

The pug-nosed old rancher, whose hair curled thick and gray over his blunt ears, slapped his rope-burned palm with the bridle reins.

"I'll give you some W Diamond range," he said angrily. "And it'll be piled six feet deep over your damned face, if you ain't gone from here in a week!"

Ben Clayton, too, flushed with sudden anger. He said, "I'm within my rights here. The law's on my side in this."

"My law, though!"

Ben Clayton dropped his chin. Martin Purdue was right. The old rancher owned the Law as well as everything else in these parts, something which Ben had momentarily forgotten.

Grinning wolfishly, Martin Purdue spat. He lifted his bridle reins then, turning his big black stallion out of the yard, and his two sons followed, tearing their eyes off Ben's wife with difficulty.

WHEN THE Purdues were well down the road, Ben followed Harriet back into the house, saying, "It's mighty hard to drive off and leave all this stuff we've worked so hard for, but I'll kill no man over land."

In the kitchen doorway, Harriet whirled on him, her face suffused with sudden color.

"Ben Clayton," she cried, "you keep saying that—I wonder if there is anything you would fight for!"

Ben said heavily, "That's something I often wonder about myself, honey."

They sat down to breakfast and ate in silence for a while.

"Won't do any good," Ben said finally, "but I'm going to make another trip to town. I'm going to have another talk with Sheriff Warnock."

"This morning?"

"Might as well," Ben said, between sips of coffee. "No use putting out any more work on this place till we see if we're going to hold it..."

The county seat town of Smoky Peak was five miles west of Ben Clayton's homestead and it sat at the base of a boulder-covered, pine-timbered hunk of mountain. Ben rode into it near mid-morning, the insides of his overall legs and his shirt between his shoulder blades wet with sweat, for the sun blazed down upon the dusty and crooked street, its false-fronted buildings and pole hitching rails with an intensity that had driven even the dogs to shade.

This was a fool's errand, Ben felt. Now was the worst possible time to seek aid of Sheriff Warnock. The lawman's term had almost expired, and unless he won the election coming up soon, he would be out of a job. Since there were more votes on Martin Purdue's W Diamond spread than the two Ben controlled—his own and Harriet's—Warnock definitely would not side a homesteader against the range hog.

Still, up to now no one had announced against Warnock, which meant that the lawman's re-election was virtually assured.

Ben didn't go directly to Sheriff Warnock's office.

He rode to the water trough at the foot of a shady bluff near the center of the crooked-streeted town, and watered his leggy sorrel. Refreshing himself and dousing his sandy head, he straightened his battered old felt into a semblance of a hat, and pulled it low on his blue eyes, eyes in which there was a trace of defeat.

Swinging into saddle then, Ben Clayton rode back and tied up in front of the general store.

A man came along the boardwalk while he was knotting the reins, and stopped to watch him in silence.

He was a tall man with neatly barbered dark hair and jet-black eyes, who wore a fine broadcloth suit and a broad black hat.

Stepping upon the sidewalk, Ben Clayton said, "Hello, Rance. How are you?"

Rance Waverly, who owned the Crystal Palace Saloon, said, "I'm all right, Ben, but you sure look like trouble was staring you in the face."

Ben nodded. "Yeah. The Purdues," he said. "They've given me and Har-

riety a week, Rance, to get off W Diamond range."

Looking concerned, the saloon-keeper took two cigars from his coat pocket, offering one to Ben, who accepted it and voiced his thanks.

"I can't stand up to the W Diamond," Ben said slowly, cigar lighted. "I'm no coward, and I'm no fool, either. And it don't seem right for me to try to take a man's life over land that he's held for years, regardless of what the law says about homesteading and titles and such stuff."

"You and Harriet have put in a lot of work there on Superstition Creek," Rance Waverly said. "Won't Martin Purdue offer you anything for your buildings?"

"Not a cent."

Rance Waverly nodded. He was thoughtful a moment. "Well," he said finally, "I don't know what to advise you to do, Ben. You're just one man against the whole W Diamond crew. If it came to gunplay, you wouldn't stand a chance."

"Ought to be some way of bucking that outfit," Ben said feelingly.

"Ben, the only way you can stop the Purdues is with a six-shooter," Rance Waverly said. He looked toward his place of business then, the Crystal Palace Saloon, and said, "Come on and I'll buy you a drink."

Ben declined the drink and turned away, saying, "Some other time, Rance. Right now I'm going to see Sheriff Warnock."

SHERIFF WARNOCK, a man with a florid face, pendulous jowls and a bulging paunch, was slacked in his swivel chair behind his desk. His battered hat lay before him. He was partly bald. The top of his head shone with sweat, and a fly kept buzzing around, trying to light on the lawman's dome. Warnock slapped at the fly, and greeted Ben Clayton gruffly, but he did not rise.

Ben's jaw muscles tightened. "Sheriff, the W Diamond outfit has issued orders for me and Harriet to clear off of Superstition Creek. Are you going to give us the protection of the Law? Are you going to help us hang onto what's rightfully ours?"

Sheriff Warnock's red brow wrinkled with scorn.

"Clayton, I can't use the Law to help you folks grab a piece of W Diamond range. That's exactly what you're asking me to do. And if I done it, if I helped you, I would have to do the same for the next squatter. And the next one. And the next one. And pretty soon the W Diamond wouldn't have no range left. Hell, man! You've squatted on the best hay meadder Martin has."

"I filed on it legal."

"You ain't going to hold it legal."

Ben hooked a leg over the corner of the desk. "Then you're backing Martin Purdue and his sons in this?"

"I'm not backing them in any deviltry. But I ain't backing you, either. I don't aim to help you grab some of their range."

Ben said testily, "You wouldn't be of any help anyway. You're too big a coward." He straightened up and strode out then.

Riding back to his homestead, Ben met the three Purdues coming toward town. The trio watched Ben intently. Old Martin kept a hand on the butt of his Colt. They said nothing, though, and Ben himself rode on without speaking.

When he had put up his sorrel, he entered the house to find Harriet seated in the living room. Her hands were clasped tightly in her lap and she had been crying. Her dress was torn, revealing the top of one full breast and her white shoulder. Her brown hair was disheveled. Ben strode to her quickly.

Pulling her erect, he enfolded her in his strong arms. He smoothed her hair. Forcing himself to speak calmly and gently, he said, "Did Lew and Floyd come back here after I left?"

Harriet bit her trembling lip, nodding without saying anything.

Ben said huskily, "They've gone too far."

"They tore my dress," Harriet whimpered. "They hurt my arm and bruised my side."

"Did they harm you otherwise?" Ben asked sharply.

"No, but they tried to," Harriet said, and she openly sobbed.

Ben kissed her wet cheek, hugged her tight for a moment and then he put an arm under her knees, lifting and carrying her to the big easy chair.

Harshly he said, "I'm going back to town, honey," and he strode out hurriedly, giving her no chance to protest.

Back in Smoky Peak, Ben Clayton went directly to the Crystal Palace Saloon, where the Purdues always hung out when in town.

About a dozen customers thronged the place, Ben saw, and the three Purdues were playing cards with Rance Waverly. Most of the red, white and blue chips were piled on the green baize in front of the saloonkeeper. Deeply interested in the game, Rance Waverly looked at Ben, but he showed no recognition. Rance was, Ben knew, seeing things with inward eyes, following the run of the cards. Ben also knew that Rance Waverly was trying his best to break the Purdues over the poker table, and had once stated that some day he expected to win title to the W Diamond in a card game.

BEN CLAYTON seldom drank, but now he called for whiskey, which the cadaverous bartender set out.

Pouring and downing a shot, Ben noticed that now Lew and Floyd Purdue were keeping him under surveillance. The fire of the whiskey added to the heat of the temper that was already boiling within Ben, and it was with difficulty that he restrained himself from drawing his Peacemaker and attempting to kill Lew and Floyd where they sat. Such an attempt would be sheer suicide. Lew and Floyd, reading Ben's decision, let their expressions grow derisive now, and Ben threw down pay for his liquor and strode out through the swinging doors.

On the porch he stopped, and stood here looking along the crooked street, observing the rigs along it and the scattering of sleepy, hipshot horses at the hitching rails.

In a moment, old Martin Purdue came out of the saloon, throwing a derisive grin at the homesteader.

"Either pull out or get ready to make your fight," the rancher said.

"Why a man like you tries to claim a whole county and keep other folks from making a decent living, I don't know," Ben Clayton said bitterly.

Martin Purdue only chuckled. He stepped off the porch to stalk up the street, angling across to the restaurant. Watching him until he disappeared, Ben Clayton then turned back into the Crystal Palace.

The poker game had broken up. Rance Waverly wasn't in sight, having retired to his office in a rear room, Ben decided. The dozen customers stood at the bar or sat at tables with drinks and cards before them.

Lew and Floyd Purdue stood together, bellied up to the mahogany, boots propped on the brass rail.

Stopping behind them, Ben saw that they were watching him in the back bar mirror, and he said, "I don't like for you fellows to visit my place when I'm not to home. I don't like the way you treated my wife."

The brothers turned. Floyd, the older by a couple of years, a rail-lean man who was pug-nosed like his father, said, "Ben, are you looking for a fight?"

"Damn right! Which one of you tore Harriet's clothing? I aim for him to die first!"

The younger brother said, "Oh, hell, Ben, you—"

With a swift gesture, Ben drew his six-gun, slamming the older brother across the forehead with its barrel. Blood spurted and ran down into Floyd's eyes. Crying out, he slapped his hands to his brows and staggered away from the bar in a blind circle.

With a curse, the younger brother had slapped a hand to his Colt, but Ben was too fast for him. Whirling savagely, Ben slammed his knee into the pit of Lew's stomach. Lew jerked forward, clutching his mid-section. He gasped and retched. Lashing out with his Peacemaker, Ben brought it down on Lew's hatbrim. It was a sodden blow that sounded throughout the room, and Lew went down. Floyd was still staggering blindly. With bone-crushing force, Ben struck Floyd alongside the jaw with the clubbed gun. Floyd, too, hit the sawdust.

Ben sprang forward, disarming both men. With their six-shooters in his left hand, Ben straightened, and he saw old Martin Purdue rushing in through the batwings, a wild look in his arrogant eyes.

Emitting a bellow, the W Diamond owner grabbed for his Colt. He shot three times before Ben could get his Peacemaker into action, and the customers sought protection of the tables and the bar, or dropped to the floor.

With the acrid smell of powder-smoke in his nostrils, Ben Clayton was spun sidewise. His back came against the mahogany, and he braced himself there, with his left shoulder numb and bleeding from one of Martin Purdue's slugs.

Ben had dropped Floyd's and Lew's guns, letting them clatter off the foot rail.

Martin Purdue, with an oath, leveled his Colt to take deliberate aim, while behind him the swinging doors still fanned.

Ben Clayton, steadying himself, fired the Peacemaker once. Martin Purdue's big frame shuddered. Ben shot again, the Peacemaker bucking and roaring in his fist. This time a crimson slash appeared on Martin Purdue's wrinkled jaw and the range hog dropped like a pole-axed steer.

THERE WAS a moment of tense silence, and then men began stirring.

When the trouble had started, Rance Waverly was emerging from his office, and he'd stood in its doorway, almost in the line of fire, looking on while Ben Clayton shot it out with Martin Purdue.

Now the saloonkeeper came forward, walking past Ben, and continuing on to kneel and feel for a pulse in Martin Purdue's wrist. There was none, Ben decided, for Rance Waverly stood up, brushing the sawdust from his broadcloth trousers, with a fatalistic look on his well-formed face.

Lew and Floyd were sitting on the

floor, moaning. Both had been blinded by blood. Both were pawing at their eyes with dirty bandannas.

"Next damned time a woman gives me that come-on look," Floyd said, "I'll bet I have sense enough to keep away from her."

Rance Waverly, not savvying Floyd's words, said: "The old man has cashed in his chips. You two going to continue this fight with Ben Clayton?"

"No," Floyd said. "We're willing to call it quits if he is."

The saloonkeeper turned to the other brother. "That go for you too, Lew?"

Lew said that it did.

Ben Clayton, despite his wounded shoulder, had reloaded his Peacemaker. Holstering it, he motioned for the cadaverous bartender, calling for whiskey. While Ben was pouring a drink, Rance Waverly glanced around the room. "Belly up, men," he said. "Drinks are on the house."

When everyone had been served, the saloonkeeper stepped out where all could see him.

"Men, there's an election coming up, and it's time we had a real sheriff. I say we kick Warnock out and give the job to Ben Clayton."

There was a shout of approval. It was so unanimous that Ben knew there was no doubt of his winning.

"Another thing," Rance Waverly said. "You Purdue brothers take your trade somewhere else. You'll buy no more drinks and play no more poker here."

Ben Clayton was thinking of being sheriff. Then he and Harriet could prove up on their homestead. Have a home. That's what Harriet wanted, a home and children. That's what she would have, now that Martin Purdue's greed didn't stand in the way.

● END



LEAD FOR THE LAST-CHANCE POOL

by FOSTER HARRIS

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"YOU BE OUT of camp in twenty minutes, bum, or I'll cut loose the dogs," Marshal Brett Conover had said. Contemptuously then he had turned his back, but keeping an eye on Rack in the back bar mirror. With a dull flush, Rack Munro had started a little, protesting gesture, and it had happened.

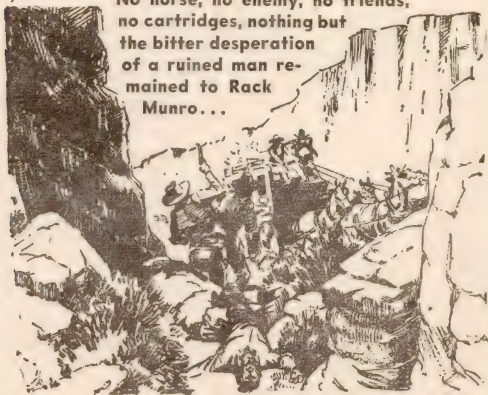
"Why, you—" Hand flashing for his gun, Brett Conover had spun like

al of Palacios, knocked him cold. And then he'd backed out of the Gold Bar with that old Colt poised, and the awed crowd paralyzed. Like that.

But they hadn't known, of course, that there weren't any cartridges in that pistol of Rack's, that it was just a rusty club. Rack alone, had known that. And now, in the chill, mountain darkness, he knew what it added up to.

Presently that arrogant gun dog of

**No horse, no enemy, no friends,
no cartridges, nothing but
the bitter desperation
of a ruined man re-
mained to Rack
Munro...**



This was an ideal spot for a hold up. a wolf to the kill. He was fast, all right. But this time, not fast enough. Just as his Colt cleared leather, Rack had hit him, across the temple with a gun barrel.

TIME ★ HONORED
WESTERN
CLASSIC

He'd buffaloeed the two-gun marsh-

Blaise Reagan's would be coming back to his senses, gathering his supporters, and starting a manhunt. It would be kill or get killed. And here was Rack Munro, no horse, no money, no friends, no cartridges, nothing but the bitter desperation of a ruined man with his back against the final wall.

Out there in the long, straggling

street of the boom camp, three or four men went swiftly, silently by, and Rack crouched deeper in the black shadow of his alley. Maybe they were hunting him. He didn't know. He did know he couldn't even walk out of this town, say nothing of running. A week ago a freight wagon had run over his foot, crushing it agonizingly, and he could scarcely hobble on it, even yet.

Everything possible, it seemed, had happened to him in the scant three days he had been back in Palacios town. He'd been recognized, of course. And why not? In the days of his glory, everybody in Palacios had known him. Rack Munro, you remember, the flash driver of the McAllister Stage Company, the hombre who'd let two of the Cole gang get away with killing an old man and taking forty thousand of the stage?

And him with a sawed-off in his mitts, and the road agents flat-footed! Yeah, crooked, or yellow, or both. The stage company, anyway, had said both, and had done its damndest...

Yes, and so had the rest of the world, added Rack. His wrath rising in a blind, bitter gorge, he was trying to think. So had the rest of his world, including Palacios...including Blaise Reagan, mealy-mouthed, deadly smooth gambling house owner who now, apparently, was just plain owning and operating the rest of the town too.

WHAT REAGAN had against him Rack didn't know. Nothing maybe. But the pitiless way he'd made it plain Rack wasn't wanted, the way he'd issued just the same as a death warrant through his heelbound marshal, back there.... A sudden roar lifted from the street, and Rack went taut.

Now they were looking for him, and he had to do something fast, or else. He faded back, circling warily around the rear of the stores, heading toward the hotel. He had no plan, really. Just the same, a desperate plan, full fledged, was in his mind as he stopped in the back, staring upward at the slit of light beneath lowered blinds above.

Those were Blaise Reagan's rooms up there, he knew, and Reagan was

there. Reagan always kept a light burning, asleep or otherwise. Maybe he was afraid of the dark, yes and doubtless he kept his door locked, too. But perhaps he could be tricked into opening up.

There was an outside, back stairs by which a man, with luck could reach that second story hallway unseen. And right across the street was the stage station and corral. Horses, saddles, everything over there, why in five minutes with luck.... Somewhere down the street, somebody howled, like a hunting wolf, and at the sound Rack whirled, heading straight for those stairs.

Apparently he wasn't seen, and a second later he was in the pitch blackness of the hallway. But light seeped from under Reagan's door, in a thin, guiding slice. Silently, Rack edged forward, empty gun in his hand.

It was the maddest of plans and he knew it, but he intended imitating Brett Conover's surly voice, to toll the big gambler out. Surely as yet Reagan couldn't have heard what had happened down the street. Brett Conover wouldn't be rushing to report that. Nor could Reagan know the pistol was empty. Blaise Reagan's room would be just about the last place in town those manhunters would expect to find their quarry. And at the right moment, with Reagan's clothes, Reagan's money, his weapons, and the big tinhorn properly gagged and hogtied behind him.... Again destiny took a swift, capricious hand.

Racing feet drummed up the stairs behind him, and Rack whipped about in sudden, stark panic. There was no time to get away, even if his injured foot would have carried him. He went flat in the shallow niche of a doorway, deadly taut, gun poised to strike. But the shadow went right by him, breathing hard, to pound on Reagan's door. "It's me, Reagan—Steve," he heard the low answer to the big gambler's ill-tempered growl. And then the door jerked open, emitting a flood of light.

Why he wasn't seen instantly Rack couldn't imagine, for the man outside apparently was looking right at him. But perhaps the light was blinding. "Well?" Reagan's snarl snapped irritably, and the man who had called

himself Steve started giving head, in a swift, guarded murmur.

"Reagan, that gunslingin' marshal of yours has just played hell. Got himself killed, maybe. He started grandstandin', and let that Rack Munro buffalo him, just plain knock him kickin'. And Rack got away."

"Why the damn, blundering fool!" Reagan's exclamation was savage, incredulous. "You say he let Munro buffalo him? Kill him! And Munro got away? You sure he's quit town?"

"Well, if Conover ever does come to in this world, it'll just be because he's got a skull too thick to bust," informed Steve dryly. "And that hellion Munro—if he ain't long gone, he's crazy. We been combin' the town."

"The hell you have!" Blaise Reagan swore angrily. "I don't want that drunken souse killed public, you fool! Not till tomorrow, anyways. Aw well, hell, it don't much matter, the rest is shapin' up okay. You boys ready to pull out?"

"We'll be there, Johnny on the spot, boss. But you're sure that gun-fightin' fool, won't be ridin' the stage in the mornin'?"

"He won't be." Blaise Reagan's laugh was hard, flat. "I've took care of that myself. Caught him right up by his pink whiskers—" He broke off abruptly, starting to turn back into the room.

"And, by the way, you hellions be damn careful you don't try to lead up the jasper inside," he added, over his shoulder. "He'll be there lookin' after my interests, and he'll look after 'em. Over gunsights, if necessary. All right, go tell Jigger to take charge, and don't bother me any more. If Conover dies, he's no loss. You and Samp better be foggin'."

HE SHUT the door, and Rack heard Steve's rasping breath. Again the fellow went right by him, unseeing, down the back stairs and into silence. Lips twisted into a tight, puckered line, Rack Munro shook his head slowly, trying to puzzle it out.

That something was on the wing was plain enough. Almost as plain was the evidence that somehow, he, Rack Munro, was somehow mixed in on it. Apparently he wasn't much

more than a pawn, from Reagan's carelessness about his fate. But if he really had cracked that marshal's skull, of course. ...It was too much of a puzzle to solve, without knowing more; and if he stayed here, he was thinking suddenly, coldly, very likely he'd be learning the rest in hades. He shut his mind and moved forward, gun poised.

"It's me again, boss—Steve." He obviously wasn't surprised. So he tried hard to make his voice sound like that just departed hombre's flat murmur, at Reagan's snarled question to his rap. "Forgot one thing. Uh—" He stopped and set himself as he heard the gambler's oath, and the click of the lock. And then yellow light was washing out over him, and his gun muzzle was moving like the head of a striking snake, squarely into a startled, white shirted paunch.

"Just stand still, Reagan." His voice didn't lift above that same murmur. But now it was, somehow, utterly deadly. "So you sicced your John marshal on me, huh? Well, you and me are goin' to have a little talk—before I leave town."

"You Munro!" Blaise Reagan drew a quick breath, and straightened. He didn't look panicky, but he was, Rack thought. "Why, I don't—" He broke off, raising his voice. "What the devil's your idea, holdin' me up! You drunken bum, you can't get away with this, you—"

"You let out just one more yap and I'll see whether I can or not," cut in Rack softly. "I'll see, you sabe? You won't. You won't be here to. Now get those hands up and back on inside, slow."

"You dirty little—" Again Blaise Reagan didn't finish, perhaps because he had just caught the look in Rack's eyes. He raised his hands, reluctantly stepping back. Following closely, Rack reached left handed, to shut the door.

What warned him then, he never knew. Certainly there was no betraying sound or shadow, as he afterward remembered, nothing at all. Yet instinct screamed as the door thudded to behind him. He ducked and went sideways, all in one lightning move; and the murderous smash of the blow fanned the back of his head.

No mistake whatever, it had been to kill, that blow. There was a third man in the room, a big fellow. Off-balance from his killing try, he was right on top of Rack, his bearded face contorted, furious. Rack Munro's pistol barrel didn't move ten inches, but it sledged that dark head with a sound like an ax hitting a log. Then it swung, in a flat arc, and Rack Munro spoke again.

"Go ahead, Blaise. Go right ahead."

Over by the table, Blaise Reagan actually had his hand on the short barreled shoulder hideout he had discarded with his coat and vest. But that soft bid stopped him as cold as Rack Munro's other answer had halted the other hombre. Probably if Rack had lifted his voice, if he'd even swung that gun of his level, in his panic Blaise Reagan would have tried shooting it out. Yet instead, now, he let his weapon drop.

"All right, you win," he said, in a thick whisper, and Rack grinned.

SOMETHING he hadn't known for years was coming back to Rack Munro now, the hot, driving feel of fortune's favor once more, the reckless pound of blood in his throat, the queer, crystal white way things look when Old Man Death reaches out. For three years, anyhow, he hadn't moved this fast, nor had he had this much luck altogether. Yet here, twice within the space of minutes, he'd beaten gunmen to the punch, yes and capped it by bluffing Blaise Reagan. With an empty gun, one he didn't even dare level, lest Reagan's sharp eyes should spot the yawning harmlessness of that cylinder. Grin widening, he reached behind him, to lock the door.

"Mebbe you better step away from that popgun of yours, Blaise. So it won't tempt you," he murmured, and motioned. "Don't mind my interruptin' your party, do you? What were you figurin' on, robbing the stage?"

It was a shot in the dark, but it struck home. The sudden, utter lack of expression on Blaise Reagan's face was betrayal enough; and Rack felt abrupt amaze. Reagan, twisting so elaborately to road agenting! There must be big game afoot.... He was cut short by Reagan's flat snarl.

"That's a U.S. Marshal you just slugged, you realize that? You'll hang—"

"Yeah?" Rack stooped slowly, recovering Reagan's gun. It was fully loaded, he saw at a quick glance, and he wondered if his face betrayed his thought as Blaise's had. "Sit down, Blaise," he ordered, gesturing toward a chair. And then he turned, to glance at the man on the floor.

There was plenty about this deal he didn't sabe, he was thinking now. This hombre on the floor, for example, lying with his bearded face turned toward the ceiling. There was a badge on his vest, all right, but even in the swift, side glance Rack gave it, while keeping an eye on Blaise too, he realized it wasn't a United States officer's insignia. Instead it looked like some kind of special agent's badge. Puzzled, he flung a curt question at Reagan, and again drew a snarl for answer.

"Oh, all right, don't break right down and tell me everything, then, tinhorn," he giped drily. "I heard enough to guess, anyways. There's a big load of something ridin' the mornin' stage, huh? And you and this crooked jasper aim to see about it?"

"I aim to see you hang," said Blaise Reagan flatly, and glared. "You damned outlaw, if you think you can shake me down, like you and that fool brother of yours did John McAlister—" He stopped hurriedly, with a little, sharp breath. For now there was death in Rack Munro's eyes, bleak, naked.

That kid brother, Dan, was a very sore spot with Rack. It had been Dan who had really cost Rack his reputation, his job, everything. Or had he? Rack would never know now, for Dan Munro was dead, found bullet riddled just a week after that holdup. But they had accused Rack of tipping Dan and Dan's Cole gang pals off to that big gold shipment—and then helping them get it.

One of those masked, slickered outlaws had looked just like Dan. The stunned, bitter agony of that recognition flooding across the years, Rack Munro shook his head grimly. He'd had the guard's sawed-off in his hands, and those two bandits caught cold, point blank, under its murderous

muzzle. And then, because one of them, the one in Dan's hat and old slicker, had cried, "Don't, Rack! Don't! It's me!"

"Yeah, Reagan, since everybody includin' you seems to expect it of me, I'm playin' the part," he said, and pocketed his own gun. The heavy cords holding back the too-ornate curtains would serve his purposes perfectly, he judged. "This is a holdup, or a shakedown, whichever you'd rather," he added. "But first I'm goin' to tie you up, and you even wiggle while I'm doin' it and I'll make it a job of cold hogtyin', you understand?"

"There'll be a reckoning, Munro," said Reagan thickly. But he did not resist, as Rack methodically and thoroughly cinched him to the chair. Only when Rack stripped a sheet from the bed and started tearing it into a gag did he speak again, in angry objection.

"Don't stuff that damn thing in my mouth! I won't yell when you leave. And there's fifty dollars in my pants pocket."

"**W**HY THANKS, Blaise," murmured Rack sardonically. "But your word ain't worth a damn, and besides, I ain't leavin' yet. Too many of your hired hands lookin' for me. Open up, now. Ah-h!" He caught the gambler by the throat, squeezing expertly until the angry mouth opened, then cramming the wad of cloth in and binding it tight.

"Mebbe it'll choke yuh to death," he suggested hopefully, and swung toward the unconscious man by the door. That hombre was still in gun rocked dreamland. But he was breathing regularly. Limping over, Rack knelt, and drew a slow, puzzled breath.

A trickle of blood, sliding down the unknown's temple, had soaked into the short-cropped, bushy beard, and that beard was peeling off. It was false.

"Pink whiskers, huh!" With a faint, amazed whistle, Rack tugged and peeled until the disguise was off. The face beneath was strange, but somehow it just didn't look as a genuine officer's should. Reflectively, Rack looked at Reagan, and learned noth-

ing there, except that the gambler went through the unknown's pockets, and again drew nothing very illuminating.

There was about twenty dollars in bills and silver, among other odds and ends, and nothing at all to identify the unconscious man. The badge on the vest was a Wells Fargo special officer's, and from the size of the pinholes, it looked like it had been on there a long time. But from the tight way the coat strained across the shoulders, it also looked like this hombre might be in somebody else's clothes. And finally, in a pants pocket, Rack found a little scrap of paper, wadded into a tiny ball, as though somebody had started to throw it away, then hadn't.

"—says they'll start at four-thirty," a hasty line on the scrap announced. "I've got everything fixed for you to—" That was all. But now Rack was beginning to catch at the picture.

The McAllister stages, south to Division Rock, often carried large amounts from the mines in the hills above Palacios. Plainly, a very important shipment must be going out on that early morning stage. The four-thirty start mentioned in the note must refer to the stage, and that was at least an hour and a half earlier than the usual departure time. Which was suggestive enough. And what was going to happen also seemed quite plain.

Somehow Reagan had caught wind of this big shipment, and Rack Munro had just stumbled into the middle of a robbery frameup. Doubtless that was where the stranger, who had called himself Steve and his partner, Samp, came in. They'd do the actual stickup job, probably, out where the road twisted through the Pinnacles. Or so Rack guessed. Just how this hombre on the floor fitted in wasn't so easy to figure. But from what he had overheard, Rack could make a stab of a guess there, too. He twisted, looking at the gagged, furious Reagan with a wry frown.

"If I was to ask you what all this meant, and you told me the truth, I'd still know you was lyin' now wouldn't I?" he commented sardonically and stooped to examining the gambler's pockets. Again he didn't learn much.

Reagan hadn't even told the truth about how much cash he had on him, there was closer to sixty than fifty dollars. "So you'd try to short change even a man robbin' you, huh?" inquired Rack and pocketed the money and looked at Reagan's watch.

It was after two-thirty. Less than two hours until that treasure stage would be rolling. He'd come up here desperately looking for pennies, so to speak, gambling his life against the blind chance of getting maybe a few cartridges, a dollar or so, some kind of opportunity to run. And here he'd stumbled into this.

COULD he wait out the two hours, risk the possibility of being trapped here? Well, he was as safe here as anywhere, he knew. And to add a gamble to the gamble he already was taking...what did that matter? Deliberately, he tore off another strip of sheeting, to blindfold the angry gambler, as well as gag him, and that done, turned once more to the man on the floor.

The coat and vest, he discovered, fitted him just about as well as they had the other man, and the broad, well filled cartridge belt was a comfort. The fellow was beginning to stir faintly now, and groan, so Rack hoisted him up on the bed, using the remaining sheet and pillowcases to make sure he wouldn't fall off, or make too much noise either. After which he recovered the pink whiskers, and swung toward the dresser.

There was a whisky bottle there, with just about enough left in it to moisten the gum left on those phony foliages. After a bit of trying, Rack contrived to make them stick, and grinned at himself in the mirror. He looked like something or other at any rate, he thought, particularly after putting on the broad hat which he judged belonged with the outfit. The sound of footsteps again out there in the hallway reached him, and he whirled, deadly taut, putting the muzzle of his, or rather Reagan's gun suggestively to the gambler's ear.

Whoever it was knocked and called Reagan's name a couple of times and the gambler squirmed. But he didn't make any noise. After awhile the

knocker gave up, and with a twisted grin, Rack caught his breath, whispered a dry congratulation in Reagan's ear, and sat down on the bed.

It was curious, he thought, that he didn't even feel excited now. Maybe he could carry this through, maybe he couldn't. But he was going to try. Outlaw at last, after the bitter, hopeless years, he had a queer, strong feeling of confidence, power. Going to hell in style, on the cushions! Stage-liner to stage robber, if that wasn't something! And yet, that loot—after all, he had it coming, he mused bleakly. Stagecoach loot—he'd already paid for plenty he hadn't got.

At a little before four-thirty when he let himself out of the room, that dark confidence was still with him. This was going to work out, somehow. There were lights over at the stage station, he saw as he came down the steps, men moving about, and the dark bulk of a coach and team in the broad entrance. Bowstring taut, concealing his limp as well as he could, he went slowly across the street.

Not even knowing the name of the hombre he was impersonating, he was all set for some tall, risky gambling. But as it turned out, it was absurdly easy. A lantern caught the glint of that badge he was purposely exposing as much as possible, and a voice spoke.

"That you, Marshal Warren? Just waiting for yuh."

Rack grunted. So that was the name, huh? "You're a little late Marshal, so climb right in if you're ready," the voice invited and above the lantern a brown, bearded face showed. Probably that was the station agent, Rack guessed, anyhow a stranger. He helped Rack into the stage, slammed the door, and leaned through the window.

"Uh, the shipment's in the front boot, Warren," he informed in a guarded murmur. "And you got Red Howard up, best silk popper we got, and Joe Neal sidin' him. When you get to Division Rock, tell old man McAllister this end of the line's sidin' him till hell freezes. All right, Red, let 'er roll!"

WHIPLEATHER exploded and the big Concord leaped forward, rocking on its leather thoroughbraces.

Not a bad getaway at all, Rack thought abstractedly. Still, if that was the best driver they had on the line now—Of a sudden, he was conscious how fast his heart was pounding.

He'd gotten away with it! Here he was, on his way. Red Howard and Joe Neal up there on the box, he didn't know either one, and they wouldn't know him. Out of the blackest possible darkness, glittering, gaudy luck had just plain decided to come shower all over him. Because, just look!

Here he was with money in his pockets, two good weapons in his belt, sitting pretty right in the middle of a road agent's dream.

Now he could guess the details, save the play almost as clearly as though Reagan had told him all. That "shipment" up there in the front boot, beneath the driver's feet, certainly must be a small fortune. Otherwise it wouldn't be rating this special stage and Wells Fargo guard. Somehow, Blaise Reagan had just sidetracked that guard, intending to slip his own man in. But here, by the favor of fortune was Rack Munro, in that guy's boots.

If he couldn't cash in on that setup when Reagan's stickups struck he deserved all he'd endured in these bitter years, he conceded exultantly. Tit for tat at last, the loot to go with the discredit, the bad name he already had. No more than two of those bandits, certainly, and if they obeyed orders they wouldn't even trouble to glance twice at the lone passenger. But Rack Munro, behind those pink whiskers.... With a thin, savage grin, he settled back, while the stage rocked on.

At bright dawn they were just topping over the first high ridge of the Pinnacles, tilting down into the little, lush meadow of Healy's Park. Narrow, and fringed with junipers through which the trail fairly scraped, it was an ideal spot for a holdup. Right here was where it was going to happen, Rack guessed, with a taut, cold crawling of expectant nerves. And then, as though the thought had been the signal, here it came.

There was a snarling shout, and then instantly the stabbing roar of gunfire. Somebody screamed, one

chopped, stricken cry. A body came plunging down past Rack's window, right under the rear wheel and the stage jolted, drove over something with a sickening, sodden crunch.

It was the messenger. They'd killed him, Rack realized in that cold, split-instant before he went into action. They hadn't given him any chance at all. Cold-blooded murder. And now the big stage was rocking, jerking like a ship in an angry sea. A plunging, masked rider came by the other window, shooting and yelling, shooting point blank at that driver, still up on top there, with his hands so full of reins he couldn't defend himself. Then Rack's pistol was moving like a dull streak of light.

A lunge of the stage threw him halfway through that right window and the mounted bandit there by the off front wheel saw him. His smoking gun chopped down, stopped uncertainly, then drove in a frantic arc to meet Rack's killing play.

For there was no mistaking Rack Munro's intentions. They were written on his face, and they read, "Death!" He had just seen a stage-liner murdered, felt the wheels crush over him. And the kind of rats who would do that, then blast a driver with his hands so full of reins he couldn't fight back—in Rack Munro's opinion, hell wasn't hot enough.

He was so blind mad his first shot missed complete, although the distance wasn't six feet. The outlaw's Colt exploded, almost in his face. And then they were shooting together.

Lead ripped the side of his jaw in a searing slash, but he never felt it. He was seeing that masked rider crash out of the saddle, wither and crash in a red blaze of swift, roaring retribution. And then the stage was stopped and, dimly, Rack Munro knew he was out of it, trying crazily for that second bandit.

SWINGING to the bridles of the lead team, that second man had stopped the stage. Now he crouched behind the wildly frightened horses, shooting across their plunging backs. It was as though instinct told him that Rack, a stageliner, wouldn't down a stage horse, ruin a crack team, even to save his own life. But that a raging

demon would come right around the team after him, right into the teeth of his frantic fire—that was something the second bandit hadn't counted on.

With a terrified scream, he broke, diving wildly for the brush. Red fury blowing in great, whirling flames through his brain, Rack swung like a gunner leading a flushed bird, and his hammer fell on an empty. He had triggered twice more, and the bandit was gone, before he realized he'd been charging with an empty pistol.

But the second bandit had been hit, just the same, he knew. Hit probably by one of Rack's earlier shots. There was blood there in the road and more on the bushes. Reaching dazedly for the second pistol still in his waistband, the gun that had belonged to Blaise Reagan, he looked up at the driver. Through a sort of reeling haze, he saw the gray, strained face, saw it wasn't looking at him but at something on back down the road. And then the driver screamed hoarsely.

"Look out! Good God, look out! Behind you—" Rack was spinning and ducking at the scream.

He was too late, he knew instantly, for the black, twin muzzle of that sawed-off already were thrusting flat at him, like eager mouths. Where that third man had come from, Rack didn't know. He never even got one good look at the fellow. He only knew there was a blur past his face, a crack!—the stagedriver's whip, he realized only afterward, and too short. It couldn't have reached that crouched gunner. But it must have startled him, tossed him off balance just the crucial split-second he was pulling his trigger.

Flame beat at Rack's face, and somehow he knew dazedly he had been missed. Knew also that he was driving his first slug, dead center, into that hulking form. He hadn't missed, he knew savagely, exultantly; the dark figure was crumpling, pumping that second barrel into the dust. Gunburned, scared to blind panic, the stage team was taking out again in a terrific surge. The driver cried weakly, "Rack! Rack, help!" And what Rack did then was pure instinct.

Until tragedy had reached him, he'd been a stageliner all his life. He'd come up the hard way, too, stable boy,

hostler, station helper, relief driver, finally full-blown silk popper. The big coach was going by in one exploding lunge, but he swung, all but pitched under the wheel as his crippled foot failed him, but managed to catch the brace strap of the rear boot.

For a ghastly moment he was dragged. But then, somehow, he pulled himself up. His straining fingers caught the top rail. And after that it was easy.

Breathless, yet triumphant, he tumbled across the crazily bucking top, and caught the sagging driver about the shoulders. Red Howard was hit, and hit pretty bad. But the jerking reins were still clenched in one convulsive, bloody hand.

Three years since Rack Munro had last touched the ribbons of a racing, six-horse team, three bleak, bitter centuries. But his craft wasn't gone. He had a badly scared team, a narrow, twisting trail and a wounded, all but helpless man to hang onto somehow. All that and perhaps danger behind as well. He couldn't be sure those three were all of the road agents. But he was managing.

He let the frightened horses run, using the brake only on the reeling turns. If there was any further, harrying gunfire from the rear he didn't notice it. But he put swift distance between him and that scene anyhow, just in case. And when he pulled in at the top of the towering ridge that walled the park to the south, the road behind showed no sign of pursuit.

HE HAD to pull in there. The blowing team could have gone on, though by now it was ready enough to stop. But Red Howard was bleeding badly, sinking fast. He'd speedily bleed to death if that chest wound, at least, wasn't attended to pronto. So Rack stopped and attended to it, having quite a time plugging off that blood. As he finished he realized the driver was looking at him with dim, pain-shrouded wonder.

"Why—why thanks, Rack," he said in a slow, faltering whisper. "I—how'd you—" But he was too far gone to ask questions, perhaps even to be puzzled much. "You—you'll take her on in?" It was more statement than question, the way he said it. "I

knowed—you wasn't lettin' a stageliner down, Rack. She's got to go through. You—"

He was out then, like a light. And Rack Munro had his problem.

Recognized. The pink whiskers were gone, he realized for the first time. Ripped away in the fight, or soaked off by that blood on his face, his own blood. His cheek was bleeding. But it didn't matter, it wasn't much. Red Howard had recognized him, twice over for that matter, for now he was remembering Red had called him by name during the fight. Red had saved his life in that fight. And now Red Howard had put it up to him, mercilessly plain.

There, right under his feet was the express chest, and it was plenty heavy he discovered as he leaned down to try its weight. So there must be gold inside, plenty of it; a fortune. The chest was locked, of course, but smashing it open would be an easy matter of just a minute or two. And there ahead of him were six horses, any one of them enough to make a horsethief risk his soul.

He had no saddle, of course, but somewhere along the way gold could fix that easy. He could just abandon the stage here and fog it. They'd never catch him—they'd probably never even know who to blame for the robbery. They'd lay it on those baffled stickups back yonder. Certainly Blaise Reagan wouldn't be telling how come a phony officer happened to be riding that stage. It was a set-up as perfect as Rack Munro had dreamed. Except for Red Howard.

But here was Red Howard, not dead. And he'd recognized Rack. If Rack just left him here, why probably he'd die with his story untold. If Rack took him in, got him to a doctor, why probably he'd live, yes and naturally spill everything. There you were.

"If!" And he didn't know this young driver at all, Rack mused bleakly, even if Howard did know him. If he took Red in, why then he not only lost the fortune in that box, he also bought himself grim trouble. Explaining how he'd happened to be on that stage, for example, and that marshal back in Palacios, and what he'd done to Blaise Reagan. The mere

idea he'd be able to make his word stick against the tall lying rich, influential Reagan would do was funny! And yet...

"I knowed—you wasn't lettin' a stageliner down," Red Howard had whispered. "She's got to go through." And there was something beyond words.

There wasn't anything else he could do—not with his background and heritage. He sent the stage swinging on, and somehow the wheels said things without words too, queer, harsh, and yet comforting melody. If a man was a stageliner once...

When he looked back from the final crest, where the road broke down in giant, curving billows toward Division Rock, away on yonder, he was quite certain he spotted horsemen on the road behind. Maybe they were pursuers, maybe not. That second bandit had got away he was remembering. And now Rack was unarmed, save for Howard's belt pistol, not much against a rifle, if those were still more of Reagan's agents. But they hadn't caught him yet.

NOW IT was practically all downhill. He let the big Concord go down in a whirling cloud of dust. And nothing happened. At Dragoon Creek he paused briefly to let the horses snatch a drink while he looked Howard over. That chest wound was still oozing blood, he found, and he couldn't stop it. Have to get him in quick to a doctor, or else. The world reeled as he turned, and he realized he'd lost considerable blood himself, while how long, how infinitely long it had been since he'd slept, had anything decent to eat, or even a drink. But he was rolling again now, stage-lining. For a little while, at least. The last few miles.

Six Mile Flat, Oak Creek, the Bosque and there ahead was the straggling street of Division Rock. Giant, loaded freight wagons were crawling, just this side of town. He would meet help right at the end of his journey. But it didn't matter, he knew, he wouldn't have turned the stage over to strangers anyhow. There was the stage station, just as he remembered it, and men running out.

"Road agents," Rack said hoarsely

to the blur of faces below him and twisted toward the limp Howard. "Here, help me. He's bad hit. Get a doc, quick. They killed Neal, but the gold's here, all safe."

An excited tide of voices hammered at him, and hands lifted the driver. Other hands tried to help Rack down, but he pushed them away. He didn't know any of these faces, he thought, and now, in the let-down, all his strength was flowing away from him. No breakfast, no supper the night before, no meals at all, not even a drink. But he'd brought the stage in. He'd tooled her in safe. The world went suddenly in a skinning reel, and this time the clutching hands were not to be denied.

When he came to, he was inside somewhere and somebody was trying to give him a drink. He choked, strangled, and got it down. It tasted like hellfire, but it helped. He looked up dizzily into a gnarled face he knew—old John McAllister's.

"Comin' around, are yuh?" Old-Man McAllister's voice was a gratified growl. "Well, you been out long enough. What was you doin', drivin' that stage?"

"There wasn't anybody else to drive it," said Rack grimly.

"That don't explain how come you was so handy," snapped McAllister. "And in Jack Warren's coat and badge, too. Well?"

Here it was, and no matter what Rack said... "I brought your express chest in safe, didn't I?" he said wearily and let it go at that. "Yeah," said McAllister, in a taut, different tone. "Yeah, and from what little Red Howard's been able to tell me—" There was sudden interruption from outside, voices calling McAllister's name and he swung irritably.

"All right, comin'!" he barked. And then to Rack: "And you stay here till I git back. See he does, boys." He went out, and with a twisted grimace, Rack lay back.

It didn't matter much what happened now. He'd had his chance to ride off with a fortune. And instead he'd brought it in, safe. A dumb choice, maybe, but he'd made it, and he wasn't sorry.

It was quite awhile before McAllis-

ter came back, but when he did he brought a belligerently bearded stranger who looked like he too had been dragged behind a coach or something and still wasn't happy about it. McAllister introduced him with a maliciously amused chuckle.

"This here is Jack Warren, Rack, the Wells Fargo gunslinger, supposed to have been ridin' double guard on that stage you brought in. Seems somebody, uh, slipped knockout drops in his soup over't Palacios last night."

"And that's my coat and vest you got on!" said Mr. Warren warmly. "Yeah and... say! What in the hell did you do with my pants!"

"Hold on!" grinned McAllister. "A helluva detective you are, not even knowin' where your own pants went. Yeah, and lettin' that Marshal Brett Conover bamboozle you like you done. It's too bad you never kilt that hellion, too, Rack, while you was at it. But tell me..."

HE BROKE off, looking down at Rack thoughtfully.

"The doc says he figures Red Howard will pull through," he informed abstractedly. "Did you know who that last hellion was Red says you downed in the road? The fellow that rode up behind?"

"Why, no." Rack shook his head, puzzled. "I think he was masked."

"He was masked," nodded McAllister. "But it was Blaise Reagan, feller. Reagan and you plugged him dead center. Hossbackin' it after the stage, Warren here found him, yeah and another plugged road agent in the brush, too, who figured he'd been double-crossed and spilled the works."

"So you was the fellow tied Reagan and Bill Coe up, huh?" broke in Warren. "What become of my—"

"And there's another thing," said Old-Man McAllister firmly. "This here outfit made a bad mistake once about its ace driver. Do you reckon if we just passed up the explanations, Rack, offered him his old job back and a bonus for savin' this shipment, he'd sort of forgive and forget?"

"Well, he might," grinned Rack. "If you can persuade this guy to forgive me forgettin' to fight in his pants."

● END

AFTER A fierce struggle with the raging, ice-clogged stream, young Smoky Rivers finally pulled himself onto the frozen bank and turned to stare back at the man in the seething water.

The man in the water was Duke Tolliver, a crooked deputy sheriff back in the crooked cowtown of Tenspot. Tolliver was a big, cruel-eyed gent with flat, dark, arrogant features. But Tolliver wasn't a good swimmer, and that was liable to prove the difference between life and death.

The lanky, red-haired Texan waddy watched the deputy as he fought the yellow, churning torrent. Tolliver was no more than twenty feet from the bank, but Smoky Rivers knew that, unaided, he'd never make it out. Tol-

liver knew it too, but he never stopped fighting. He was like a bulldog, hard, merciless. He boasted that he always got what he went after, one way or another. Now, even as death reached icy hands for him, he didn't ask for help.

Jumbled thoughts whirled in Smoky's brain as he watched Tolliver's fight for life. On the ground nearby was a cotton wood branch, twenty feet long. Instinctive decency screamed for him to grab the branch and thrust it out to where Tolliver could grasp it. But Smoky fought himself stubbornly to keep from doing it.

For if he pulled Duke Tolliver from the stream, it meant a hangnoose.

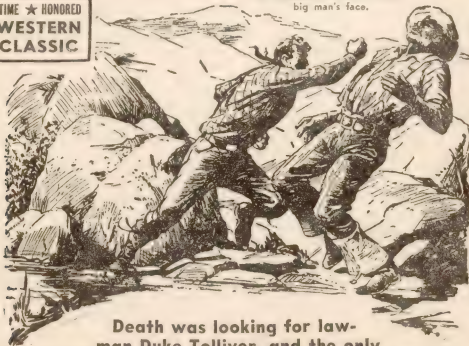
A HANGNOOSE WON'T HOLD A TEXAN

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by Gunnison Steele

TIME ★ HONORED
WESTERN
CLASSIC

He smashed his fist into the
big man's face.



Death was looking for law-
man Duke Tolliver, and the only
gent who could save him was the Texan he
was taking back to the gallows...

If he let him drown, it meant freedom...

Two days ago, back in Tenspot, Smoky Rivers had killed a man. Playing stud poker in a strange town, he'd caught one of the card-slicks cheating. There was a gun-ruckus, and when the powdersmoke cleared away the tinhorn lay dead on the floor.

It had been a clear case of self-defense. But the gun-swift Texas ranny had quickly discovered that he didn't have a chance for a fair trial in Tenspot. For the card-slick he'd killed was Jack Dorn, son of old Hawk Dorn, gun-boss of Tenspot. So Smoky Rivers had been thrown behind bars.

That same night, a while before dawn, he'd ripped a rotten bar from his cell window, topped his own roan bronc and slipped out of town. But almost instantly Duke Tolliver had bayed like a hound dog on his trail, bent on collecting the thousand dollar bounty that Hawk Dorn had placed on his head. Relentlessly as a hungry wolf, he'd trailed Smoky. And captured him, for Smoky Rivers had been without a gun.

They'd started down out of the hills in the teeth of a raging blizzard. The blizzard had hit full force a while before they reached the swollen, boiling stream. They'd left their broncs on the far side, knowing that to get wet meant almost certain death, and started across in a leaky boat that was cached there.

A sudden impulse, born of desperation, had caused Smoky Rivers to tip the boat, capsizing the rickety craft and dumping them both into the treacherous current...

Now Smoky knew it was the crooked deputy's life against his own. If he let Tolliver drown, that would end things; he could go back to Texas and forget about that fake murder charge.

But, all at once, Smoky Rivers knew he couldn't let even a wolf die like that. Telling himself he was a fool for doing it, he seized the cottonwood branch, flung one end of it out toward Duke Tolliver. Tolliver grabbed frantically at the limb, but there was no gratitude in his frozen eyes.

The deputy's legs were so numb and stiff with cold that he staggered as he

pulled himself onto the bank beside Smoky Rivers. The redheaded ranny stared in amazement at the thing in Duke Tolliver's hand. Even in his fight for life in the raging water, Tolliver hadn't turned loose of the long-barreled .45 he'd been holding on Smoky when the boat capsized!

Now he jabbed the gun at Smoky, a vicious sneer curling his thin lips.

"You thought, after yuh saved my life, I'd be tender hearted and let yuh go free, didn't you?" he asked.

Quick anger lashed at Smoky Rivers. "No, I didn't think that," he grunted contemptuously. "I pulled yuh out, just like I'd pull a dog, or a coyote. Anyway, what difference does it make. Hadn't yuh just as soon drown as freeze to death?"

TOLLIVER shook his shaggy head jerkily. He looked down at his clothes, already freezing on his body, then about at the bleak, empty country. A blue-black twilight had settled. The bitterly cold wind was howling with renewed fury down from the hills, bringing a drift of sleety snow.

Duke Tolliver knew that, without a fire and shelter, they'd freeze to death within an hour. A queer, trapped look came into his yellowish eyes.

"I ain't gonna freeze," he said fiercely. "I ain't never been licked, and I don't aim to let a blizzard do it. I aim to take yuh back to Tenspot, and collect that thousand dollar bounty!"

Tolliver felt with stiff fingers in first one pocket, then another. That panicky look deepened in his predatory eyes.

"Yuh got a match?" he asked harshly.

Smoky nodded, felt in his pocket and produced a tiny silver match box and opened it.

"Just one," he said slowly.

Greedily Tolliver snatched the match box. Inside the box was a single match. Carefully Duke Tolliver tested it.

"Dry!" he gloated. "We'll make a fire and dry out these duds. Then we'll hit for Tenspot!"

"Just one little match, Tolliver," the Texas redhead spoke grimly. "All that's between us and freezin' to

death. What if that match don't burn?"

"It's gotta burn! I'm lucky, too lucky for that match to go out. If it does—if we don't get a fire...."

"We'll die!" Smoky drawled, and grinned thinly. "It wouldn't be pleasant to die like that, to freeze up like a cake of ice, would it? I heard you was tough, Tolliver; they told me back in Tenspot that yuh broke gents in two with your hands. Not gettin' scared, are yuh?"

"Who said I was gettin' scared?" the bounty-hunter ripped out. He stared quickly about, shoved his gun at Smoky Rivers. "Git over there to them cliffs. We got tuh have a wind-break."

Smoky Rivers saw sudden, ruthless death staring at him from Duke Tolliver's blazing eyes. He turned, stumbled toward a nest of cliffs that cradled a bend in the stream a hundred yards away. Already his body felt numb, dead. Slivers of ice chipped from his frozen clothing as he walked.

They found a little hollow between two walls, which served as a wind-break. Bits of dead grass and brush littered the ground. Even with the inadequate wind-break, Smoky knew that without a fire they'd freeze to death within a short while.

Duke Tolliver's movements were jerky, as he started gathering bits of twigs and grass. He kept looking upward, as if trying to locate the restless, moaning sound in the sky. Finally, when he'd raked together a pile of kindling, he knelt and took the match from the box.

Smoky watched narrowly. Maybe that match meant less to him than it did to Duke Tolliver. If he went back to Tenspot, he'd maybe hang, and for nothing worse than killing a tinhorn card-slick who had needed killing. With life in the pot, a gent could afford to gamble. . . .

"The last match, Tolliver," he heard himself saying. "Yo're hard—hard enough to hang an innocent man, just to collect a thousand dollar bounty. But are yuh hard enough to keep from freezin'?"

"Stop talkin' about freezin', blast yuh!" Tolliver said savagely. "Here—git down and help keep the wind from blowin' this match out!"

Smoky dropped to his knees beside the deputy. There was a strained tense look on Tolliver's thin face, and his breath hissed harshly between clenched teeth. Carefully shielding the match in the palm of his hand, Tolliver scratched it across a rock. As the match flared up jerkily, he applied it quickly to the pile of kindling.

The pale flame licked at a twig, spread to another.

Smoky Rivers reared suddenly to his feet. His muscular shoulder caught Tolliver under the chin, knocked him sprawling.

At the same instant a howling gust of wind swooped into the little hollow. A tiny spiral of gray smoke curled upward from the pile of kindling as the flame licked out!

WITH a savage oath, Duke Tolliver lunged to his feet. Stark panic flared momentarily in his cruel eyes as he stared at the pile of twigs. Then he whirled on Smoky Rivers.

"You brainless idiot!" he croaked harshly. "Why'd yuh do that? Yuh've the same as murdered us both!"

Smoky Rivers faced the big man-breaker, his smoke-wreathed eyes bleak as the blizzard winds that screamed about them.

"Mebby I have," he said, through teeth that were clenched to keep them from chattering with cold. "Yo're a yella skunk, Tolliver. Yuh don't deserve to live. As for me, if I go back to Tenspot with you, I'll be gallows bait. This way, I'll at least have the satisfaction of seein' you die with me. Die slowly, like a bucket of water freezin'!"

"I ain't gonna die!" Duke Tolliver gibbered. "Didn't I say I ain't never been licked?"

"Yo're gonna be licked now," the Texas redhead rapped. "I aim to lick you, beat yuh to a pulp, just to show yuh before you die that you ain't so tough and hard. And when I'm through, the blizzard will finish yuh up. Git set, you bounty-huntin' four-flusher—heah I come!"

He started toward Tolliver. But Tolliver backed away, the gun out-thrust in his hand.

"Stay back," he yelled hoarsely.

Cursing wildly, Tolliver jerked at the trigger. But nothing happened.

"The trigger on that gun's frozen," Smoky said. "Just a cake of ice, like you'll be in a little while. Hear that wind, Tolliver? That's the blizzard gods laughin'."

Smoky Rivers leaped suddenly, ducked to escape the gun that Tolliver flung savagely at him. His fist arced, smashed with terrific force into the deputy's snarling features. Tolliver reeled backward, blood spurting from his lips. Then he braced himself, fell into a half-crouch.

Smoky stood motionless, watching the big man's advance. Then, like a huge cat, he leaped. Smoky Rivers didn't dodge or retreat.

Smack! Again his iron-hard fist blasted savagely into Tolliver's rocky face. But Tolliver caught his arm, jerked him in close, flung his arms about his lighter antagonist's body. Pain lanced through Smoky's body as those massive arms clamped down. He rammed his knee upward into Tolliver's stomach, and they went down.

Locked in each other's arms, they rolled over and over, mauling, clawing, gouging, fighting with the savagery of hungry wolves. Then, suddenly, they were on their feet again, driving jarring blows.

Slowly, Duke Tolliver gave ground. He was more powerful than Smoky Rivers. But the spirit had gone out of him. Smoky knew suddenly that the bullying deputy was afraid, a coward. He kept after Tolliver.

And Duke Tolliver kept backing away. His eyes flicked wildly about for some means of escape. But Smoky followed him relentlessly, his hard fists chopping and smashing at Tolliver's battered features. Not until Tolliver had wilted completely, and lay on the ground, did he stop.

After a moment, Tolliver got slowly to his feet. Clashing emotions were stamped on his face as he stared bewilderedly about. Rage. Puzzlement. Then stark, naked fear.

"Licked!" he whispered hoarsely. "Gawd—I kin already feel the ice in my blood..."

Duke Tolliver turned suddenly, like a man gone blind, and started reeling away from the cliffs. But he'd gone no more than ten steps when Smoky Rivers' voice lashed out at him above the screaming wind.

"Wait!" Smoky called. "Tolliver, you cowardly rat, come back heah!"

BUT Duke Tolliver didn't stop, nor look back. He heard the pound of the fighting redhead's boots behind him, and memory of those battering, slashing fists made him reel faster in a wild effort to escape. But Smoky's arms went suddenly about him, dragged him to a standstill. Tolliver struggled, cursing and whimpering as Smoky dragged him back into the hollow.

"Yuh can stop whinin', Tolliver," the redhead said contemptuously. "Yuh ain't gonna die. Look at the fire—it's burnin'!"

The big bounty-hunter stared amazedly at the pile of kindling on the ground. He saw a wisp of gray smoke curl upward. Then a yellow tongue of flame licked hungrily at the twigs. Warmth, like a belated benediction, touched their faces.

The fire was burning—would continue to burn!

"No use, Tolliver," Smoky told him softly. "I've got the gun now, and the fire's thawed it out. I'm boss, now!"

"That gun won't keep you from hangin'," Tolliver sneered. "You may kill me, but that murder charge'll still be against you back in Tenspot. Yuh can't get away from that."

"I don't aim tuh try to get away," Smoky said. "No jury on earth, outside of Tenspot, would convict me of murder. I didn't break jail because I was guilty. I meant to go over to Buckhorn and surrender to Sheriff Tom Stark, where I could get a fair trial. That's where I was headed when yuh caught me. That's where I'm goin' now, soon as this blizzard lets up, and yo're goin' with me—hawg-tied! After that, yuh'll be laughed out of office. Yuh won't ever spend any more blood-bounty money, Tolliver!"

Duke Tolliver hunched lower over the fire, to hide the bitter defeat in his eyes. The howl of the wind as it swept down from the hills sounded like a requiem, cruel and mocking.

But for Smoky Rivers, the red-haired Texas buckaroo, it carried a note of hope and promise for the future... ● END

SHERIFF Mosely couldn't be expected to explain why Old Man Winter should choose the day Til Kennedy was dying to whistle through the Bitterroots with the icy breath of his first freezing storm.

The lawman bent his head against a sudden blast of the shrieking gale, stopping his horse at Mrs. Kennedy's weather-scarred cabin. He stepped off, paused to clap his hands back to wipe off frost that had gathered on his heavy eyebrows, he became aware suddenly that a strange black horse was already tied beside his own.

The black horse was thin, gaunt-looking, as if it had been ridden hard and far. If Sheriff Mosely didn't recognize it, it must have been ridden a long way. Mosely had been in these parts, boy and man, for twenty years before being elected sheriff, and ten years since. He knew everybody hereabouts. That was why it was a neighborly duty to accept old Doc Stevens' suggestion and

her no end."

Mosely's forehead creased with vertical wrinkles. A long time since he had even thought about Joe Kennedy. Not a bad lad as he remembered him. A little wild, impulsive maybe. But Joe had gone out of the country when he was still in his teens and no one had ever seen him since. The old lady had mentioned a few times that she got letters from up Montana way. Joe had made good up there. That was about as much as anybody knew.

Before he went inside, Mosely pulled his six-gun out of its holster and examined the action. It was just a habit. Sometimes a little grease could get pretty hard and tight in cold weather. That could slow up a gun's action and once it had almost cost Mosely his life.

Doc Stevens held the door for Mosely and they went inside. The cabin was a tiny two-room except a dirty, ragged Indian blanket hanging across the cabin's middle.



OWLHOOT GOLD

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by John
Lawson

be on hand when Mrs. Kennedy died. The poor old soul had been blind these last four years. Her life had never been any bed of roses. There were often things dying persons wanted to get off their chests. Some things they would tell to the doctor. Sometimes a preacher came in handy. Sometimes it was the law.

Doc Stevens came out the door as Mosely stepped up onto the porch. "You're in time, Sheriff. She's still conscious."

Mosely nodded without speaking or even smiling. He scraped the muddy snow off his boots on the scraper fastened to the cracked and broken porch boards. "Whose horse?" He nodded toward the black beast tied near his own.

Doc Stevens grinned. "The old lady got a break. Her son, Joe, rode up about an hour ago. First time she's seen him in fifteen years, only o' course, she can't see him. But the sound of his voice has cheered

**The kid had a deadly gun
—but he also had a
heart....**

The bed where the sick woman lay was on the other side of the blanket. Mosely stepped over to the patched-up cook stove to warm his hands before going in. "I shouldn't really be out here today," he confided to the doctor in a low tone. "There's a bank robber loose an' a reward is offered for him in Colorado. He was seen up in Horrowtown yesterday aheadin' this way," Mosely winked and smiled at Stevens. "With Mrs. Mosely havin' our second baby right soon, an' me bein' eligible for that reward money because o' this gent comin' from outside territory, I should really be out beatin' the brush."

Stevens was an older man, with hair beginning to gray, and a face always seeming to smile, although when you looked close you could tell the smile was part of his regular expression

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with nothing put on special just for now. He slapped the sheriff on the shoulder and said, "It's cold out, Sheriff. Your Christian duty is maybe more important even than that reward money."

Stevens lifted a corner of the rug curtain. They went into the sick room.

The place was dirty to the point of filth. Old Til Kennedy had lived alone, getting along somehow the best she could without her eyes, surviving on a pension given her by the government for some long-forgotten deed of bravery by her dead husband. Hearing the sound of their footfalls, she turned her face weakly on the pivot of her bedraggled-looking head. "Thet you, sheriff?" she whispered in a hoarse, whistling voice.

"It's me all right, Til. I ran out t' see how you are doing."

Mosely talked to the sick woman, but his eyes were on the man who sat near the bedside.

"My son came home," Til Kennedy sighed with a kind of weary reconciled contentment. "He heard I was sick an' 'e come home."

The man sitting by the bed took the old lady's hand and squeezed the thin bony fingers with affectionate pressure. "Just a short ride, Ma. 'Tain't as far up t' Montana as you'd think. Pretty good travelin' down the east side o' the mountains over the prairie."

The stranger's face was hard in spite of the warm tones in his voice. He eyed the sheriff instead of looking at the mother he was talking to. His unkempt whiskers showed that he hadn't shaved recently. He looked half starved. His eyes were bloodshot and shiny.

Mosely said, "Mighty thoughtful of you t' come home, son. I reckon you got word somehow your mother was ill."

"I ain't jist ill," the old woman interrupted. Her words were becoming spaced out and laborious. Doc Stevens stepped forward, seeing the glaze of approaching death beginning to form in her sightless eyes. He took hold of her wrist, felt of the pulse and shook his head slowly. "I—I ain't jist ill. I'm adyin'." She reached up her left hand and laid it on top of the rough hand of the man who sat there

and held her right one. She smiled the kind of smile that is benevolent because it is hardly of this world any more. "My g—good boy. Y—you came home t' say g'bye t' yer old mother. I—I—guess that repays me fer all I been through. I can d—die now—happy—and..."

There was no longer anything left but the smile. The wind shrieked outside and howled around the corner of the cabin. The lids closed down gently over the eyes that couldn't see. Joe Kennedy kneeled by the bed, laying down his mother's hand gently, then leaning forward, kissing her on the forehead. After that he looked up at Mosley. A bit of moisture glistened in his eyes, making them seem momentarily a little less cruel and hard. "It was worth the long ride." Joe Kennedy stood up. He shook hands with Doc Stevens, thanked him for what he had done. "She died a little easier because I came, didn't she, Doc?"

"Yes, she did, Son." Stevens took Joe's hand, held it firmly a moment.

Mosely stood watching. Not many strangers came riding through here. It was a bit odd that a man named Jet Lestley, wanted for bank robbing, should have been seen so near as Harrowtown the day before. Joe Kennedy must have ridden that way. "You rode down through Harrowtown yesterday?" Mosely asked Joe Kennedy.

Kennedy still had hold of Stevens' hand. "Uhuh," he said, "that was shortest."

"I notice you ain't wearin' a gun. A lot o' people in these parts does."

Joe Kennedy dropped the doctor's hand and reached for Mosely's. "Yep, I suppose they do." He laughed a short, dry laugh. "Some people have t' wear guns, I suppose. Those that's runnin' from the law or has enemies."

Mosely took Joe Kennedy's hand and couldn't help responding to Kennedy's warm pressure. He searched the young fellow's face, trying to make his mind bridge the years, searching for some identifying mark of identification. He began to feel a little guilty inside. He had wanted that reward pretty bad. The thought had come that maybe Joe Kennedy could be the man that was wanted for that bank job. But he knew actually

that Joe Kennedy couldn't be the man he wanted. The report on the bank robber was too complete. Jet Lestley had been born in Texas. The information Mosely had was detailed and conclusive about the bank robber's childhood and youth. There was just no way possible the two men could be confused. Fifteen years was a long time. It was natural the sheriff shouldn't remember anything identifying about Joe Kennedy. But the way Joe had come and kissed his mother and held her hand...

Mosely laughed and squeezed the young fellow's hand. "You did the right thing, son. A man gets his reward somehow, some time fer a thing like you've done. I wish yuh luck."

Joe Kennedy said, "Thanks, Sheriff." He turned and looked down soberly a long moment at his dead mother. He only turned away as Doc Stevens pulled the sheet up gently and laid it over her face. Joe Kennedy glanced around the little room and sighed. "She didn't have much, did she? I should ha' sent her money oftener. If there's anything here has any value, Sheriff, go ahead and sell it. I'll come into town and sign a deed. You take care of any papers that's necessary. I ain't in no particular need. I'll write when I get back t' Montana. If the place brings anythin' worth while, you can send me a part. I'll see yuh get paid fer yer trouble."

After a little, they went outside and mounted their horses. They rode into town together. While Doc Stevens was telling the undertaker, Joe Kennedy sat in Mosely's office making out the deed. He signed it, shook hands with the sheriff again, then went outside and mounted the black horse and rode away north, toward Montana.

IT WAS sixty days before Mosely got a letter. When he did, it wasn't exactly what he had expected. There wasn't any return address telling where it was from. But it was postmarked in Texas and not in Montana. It read:

Dear Sheriff:

I hope you won't curse yourself for being a fool when you read this. Things can sometimes work out for

the best in mighty strange ways. After holding that woman's hand when she died and seeing the happiness in her face, something sort of happened to me, I guess. I've got a job. You don't need to ever worry about me going against the law again. You see, Sheriff, I just got into a little trouble at first. They put me in Deer Lodge for a year. This fellow, Joe Kennedy, was in there for life. He had a soft streak for his mother and he kept getting letters to her somehow about how good he was doing.

He got word about how sick she was just the day I got out. He made me promise I'd stop and pretend I was him. The old lady was blind and she hadn't heard his voice for about fifteen years. It wasn't very hard to fool her. I found that fooling her made it easy to fool you, too.

But it's kind of strange and I don't quite understand it myself, Sheriff, but ever since I kissed that old lady into the next world, it's been mighty hard to keep fooling myself any more. I'm sending you a little package by express. It contains as much money as I took from that bank on my ride down from Montana. Get it back to them, somehow. Tear up that deed and see if you can't do something for that boy up in Deer Lodge with what he gets from the place. There's some good in him someplace, too.

Sheriff Mosely swore softly to himself. Jim Peters came in right then from the express office. "Got a damn heavy little package here, Mosely. Either it's gold or it's lead. It's insured."

Mosely leaned back in his chair and looked at the express agent through half-closed, thoughtful eyes. "It's gold, Jim. Damn right, it's gold. Purest gold, anybody ever found. Ain't one prospector in ten million ever finds that kind o' gold. Never thought it was possible before, myself."

Peters put the heavy package down on Mosely's desk rather quickly. It seemed like he left the office abruptly, glancing back once, as if not sure that the old lawman hadn't suddenly become a bit teched. ●END

The Acuna five thousand dollar payroll robbery would never bring a coward hell-for-leather—it might bring the best shot in Cardenas County though!

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COLT- TRIAL FOR A COWARD

by
Rod
Patterson

TIME ★ HONORED
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The bronc was as rigid as
a crouching cat!

STEVE LACEY had tried, lots of times, to tell Nancy Greer how much he loved her, but always the words had jammed in his throat. Propinquity had made him stammer like a bashful school-boy.

There were a great many things that left Steve diffident and tongue-tied, things that, so it seemed to him, a man couldn't rave about without seeming silly and sounding foolish. Like trying to describe a desert sunset, for example, or the dawn song of the Crissal thrasher. Those things were plumb beautiful all right, but a

man didn't do much palaverin' about 'em...anyway, not unless he was a poet or a preacher or one of them fellas, Steve dubiously reflected.

As he stood now under the wooden awning of the Chickasaw Hotel, with Nancy's face like a delicately carved cameo upturned to his, he found it harder than ever to talk. He was fighting down an impulse to cup that smooth tanned little chin in his hand, to tilt it back and press a kiss against the scarlet arc of those stubbornly pursed lips. He wanted to gather her tightly in his arms, so she couldn't

help but feel the deep insistent pounding of his heart. Maybe, then, she'd know how much he loved her....

However, this seemed neither the time nor the place to yield to the temptation. For one reason, it was broad daylight and they were standing in the middle of Dobe Springs' main stem. And for another, Nancy Greer's voice wasn't soft and dulcet, as a lover's ought to be; it was bitter and accusative.

"You," she cried scornfully, "the best shot in Cardenas County, and afraid! That's it—that's the real reason, Steve Lacey! You won't do it because you're afraid!"

For a long moment he stood in silence, gangling arms hung slackly at his sides, dust-colored Stetson crushed in his bronzed big-knuckled hand. There was, about Steve Lacey, a generally bronzed, weathered look. His hair was a tawny rumple above the smooth planes of his deeply tanned face, and in the brown dark of his eyes tiny flecks of gold danced. A rich brown dust clung even to his boots and the faded jumpers he wore, reminder of the ten-mile ride that had brought him here this afternoon for the annual Cardenas County rodeo and cattle fair. Six foot tall, slim and tough as whipcord, he had to bend a little, looking down at the flushed, angry face of Nancy Greer.

"Well," she flared hotly when he continued simply to look down speechlessly into her angrily glinting blue eyes, "why don't you say something? Or have you lost your tongue as well as your courage? Oh, Steve," her voice broke pleadingly, "I've just got to find somebody to ride guard with Hitch McNeal on the stage this afternoon, and you're the only one I can really trust. I—I can't honestly believe you're afraid, but that's what anybody would think—after dad being shot last month, and all."

HER LIPS were trembling now, and Steve Lacey's jaw grimly tightened. Why couldn't women be reasonable? He felt a deep, aching hurt at hearing her talk to him like this, but his mind was made up, and he was fiercely determined not to change it. Couldn't, if there was to be

any future for Nancy and him. His eyes reached hungrily to the remoteness of her shiny blue-black hair, swept down the lithe supple line of her body to the tight whipcord riding breeches, tucked snugly into her brightly polished Justin boots.

His voice came finally, filled with a soft reproach. "You know I ain't afraid, Nance. You know it ain't that." Then, stubbornly, when she said nothing: "But I just can't do it today no matter what. You know how bad I need that five hundred cash money they're puttin' up this afternoon for the bronc-ridin' contest. Well, either I win it or the bank's gonna grab my place. I just gotta win it, Nance!" He looked at her appealingly, as if she might supply him with the words to go on. Then, when she remained frigidly tight-lipped: "If I lose the ranch, it means I'm finished, Nance—plumb washed up. I—we—well, I reckon we couldn't get—that is—"

"Oh, couldn't we!" She lowered her glance and slapped angrily at her right boot with her riding crop. "You always did take a lot for granted, Steve Lacey!"

"But Nance—"

A sudden seriousness weighted her voice, blunting the edge of her anger. "I've got to think of dad now, Steve," she said soberly. "Doctor Yule told me this morning that I've got to get that surgeon over here from Tucson, that dad's wound isn't healing at all. But if I can't keep the stage running, I can't pay for the operation, and if dad doesn't have that operation—" Her voice caught, and Steve Lacey felt a sudden rush of pity. But before he could speak she went on: "I reckon you know that was a five thousand dollar payroll the Acuna Silver Mine lost last month when the stage was held up and dad was shot. Well, the mine manager told me yesterday that if there's another holdup they're going to tear up our contract. And that would mean the end of the Antelope Stage Line, Steve—the—the end of everything, I guess." He felt her eyes on him, misty, pleading as only a woman's eyes can plead. "I'm terribly afraid, Steve," she faltered. "We're carrying payroll again today and—oh, I just don't know what may happen!"

Words, as usual, came hard to Steve Lacey. He awkwardly reached out his hand and patted her arm. "Now—now look," he said. "You're just abein' spooky over nothin'. Ain't no cause you should git all fidgeted up thisaway. Why, that holdup was only a month ago, and the sheriff's still out huntin' the hombre that done it. You don't reckon he'd be that careless to come back and try it ag'in, now do yuh?"

She shook her head. "I don't know, Steve. All I know is, I can't take a chance." Then, abruptly, her temper flared again. "Besides," she cried, "you're just trying to put me off with a lot of useless arguments. All right then, if you won't ride with Hitch I'll have to find a man with backbone who will!"

STEVE LACEY looked down at her with a dumb despair, stung into tonguelessness under the inflexible lash of her scorn. He tried to think of words to speak, words that would convince her that she didn't have to worry about another holdup; words that would easily cause her to see why he had to win that purse today at the rodeo. It was to save his spread... *their* spread. Why couldn't Nancy see it that way, see that in just another month or two he'd maybe have enough dinero scraped together to buy those white-faced Herefords from the T Slash over in Whetstone Valley? She knew he wasn't any coward. Why couldn't she understand that he was simply trying to build for the future, their future? And what was the matter with that blasted tongue of his, that he couldn't speak up and put definitely into words these thoughts that ran so clearly and convincingly through his head?

"Well—" he began finally, but it was too late. He stopped, seeing that she wasn't listening to him, aware that her glance had flicked past him towards a tall, erectly seated rider who was coming slowly in their direction from the hitch rack in front of the Golden Glow Saloon.

Jack Orloff never rode in the manner of one who rides for the simple utility of getting from one place to another. He rode stylishly, with an air of elegant ease, in the manner of

one who desires to be noticed and appreciated. And there wasn't any question about it—the man *could* ride. Nancy Greer's eyes held on him with a curiously sustained interest.

An immaculate pearl-gray Stetson was tipped at a rakish slant above his narrow, handsomely dark face, and the expensive Visalia saddle of his prettily stepping steeldust glittered resplendently as the sun struck its silver filigree.

Sure, Steve thought grudgingly, the hombre could ride—but he was cruel with horses. You could see that from the way he held back on the reins, and at the same time danced his horse by trickily cutting him with the spurs.

Orloff came out of the saddle with the languid grace of a cat and looked appreciatively at Nancy Greer as he took off his hat. "It's funny," he grinned, "from how far away I can pick out a pretty girl. How's your dad, Nancy?"

She flushed a little at the easily proffered compliment, then despondently shook her head. "He—he's not so good, Jack." Her glance shifted briefly to the resentful frown that had come suddenly to Steve Lacey's ordinarily placid face; then, as abruptly making up her mind to something, she turned and said impulsively to Orloff: "I'm in trouble, Jack. I—I wonder if you might know of a good man I could get to ride guard for Hitch McNeal on the stage this afternoon?"

Jack Orloff thoughtfully stroked his chin, then a strange gleam lighted his enigmatic gray eyes. "Why sure," he said. "What's the matter with Lacey here? Best shot in Cardenas County."

Nancy shook her head. "He—he can't. He's—"

Steve broke in angrily: "You don't have to explain, Nancy. Orloff knows damned well what I'm doin' this afternoon!"

A rigid grin stiffened Orloff's face. "I thought maybeso you'd be helpin' a lady in trouble regardless," he jeered. "But I reckon poppin' at targets and shootin' down outlaws is two different things." Steve Lacey's long body tensed, his big-boned hands rigidly knotting as he took a stiff step towards Orloff. "You've

spoke your piece," he bit out tightly. "Now git!"

With a sudden low outcry Nancy Greer sprang in front of him and lunged desperately at his tautly readied arms. "Stop it!" she cried furiously. "Oh, you—you fool!"

HHE FELT the tension drain out of him as he saw the wild hurt look in her eyes, sensed how close she was to hysteria. He had only a dim awareness of Orloff saying: "Don't worry, Nancy, he's only play-actin'." Then Orloff was up on the steeldust and telling her: "Maybeso I can dig you up somebody for that guard job, Nancy. But first I gotta get over to the fair grounds. I'm aimin' to pick me up a little cigar money in that bronc-bustin' contest."

He was gone then and Steve Lacey was staring down helplessly at Nancy Greer, confusedly conscious that he had again said and done the wrong thing.

Nancy's gaze came up to him. "Steve—" she began, and then suddenly there were tears in her eyes and she had abruptly turned and was hurrying up the street, away from him.

He stood a moment in awkward indecision, then swung and started walking vaguely towards the office of the Antelope Stage Company. His buckskin, Goldie, was tied to the hitch rail in front of the office and as he thrust his foot in the stirrup a wheezy voice invited, "Hey, Steve, wait up fur a minute!"

Then the office door screamed and Hitch McNeal stepped down to the boardwalk. Hitch's jaws, working animatedly on a large-sized chew of tobacco, curtailed their mandibular activity long enough for him to advise: "I jest come back from Pop Greer's, Steve. He's plumb sot on you makin' that ride with me this afternoon."

His faded blue eyes narrowed quizzically on Steve as he paused briefly to shift quid. Then, with his left optic sagaciously squinted, he scratched ruminatively at his grizzled chin and continued: "Tain't no seekrit we'll be totin' the Acuna Mine payroll, soon's the train gits in. Well, I'll be alookin' and Nance's been alookin'—

but we hain't neither of us got ahold of no gun messenger yet."

Steve grinned tiredly. He liked this garrulous old-timer, had been fond of him ever since they'd punched cows together for Pop Greer's old Bar G Bar outfit down at Bonito. But now...

"You ain't gonna make me say it all over again, are you, Hitch?" Steve's grin thinned away. "Nobody's gonna try anything funny with that five hundred reward notice fresh pasted up from that other holdup. Besides, you know why I wanta win that bronc-bustin' at the fair today."

"Yeah, I know." The old man spoke carefully. "I reckon you'll win the bronc-bustin', Steve, but I ain't so dead certain you'll be winnin' the prize you set the mos' store by."

"You—you mean Nancy?"

"Reckon that's what I'm pertickler referrin' to." Hitch's eyes avoided Steve's searching glance. "Nancy's like one o' them high-strung hawse criters yuh can't curb too much. Gotta give 'em time to learn, git 'em use' to the bit." He drew bead on an imaginary target and sluiced a jet of tobacco juice into the street, staring expressionlessly at the little snake-head of dust that drifted away. "Girl a'twenty gits foolish notions," he suggested. "'Bout heroes, an' such."

Steve looked thoughtful. Finally he said: "Sheriff find any clues on the holdup yet?"

"Nothin' much," Hitch answered laconically. "Found the mark of a boot that had three diamon'-shape calks set into her. Little blood an' hawse-hide stuck onto the barbs of a fence clost by. Nothin' import'nt."

"Hmmm. Well, I gotta be goin', Hitch."

Hitch said idly, "Nancy's inside." Then he added, "Yuh better go in."

FOR A LONG moment, Steve hesitated. He thought of himself in there with Nancy, boldly kissing her, explaining to her in words that flowed out in smooth, polished sentences why he couldn't do what she wanted, easily convincing her that he was right. And then he knew it was a golden dream, a dream that would immediately tarnish and turn to dross if he went in there and tried

to make it come true. It wasn't in him to talk that way; his tongue would jam, Nance would flare up at him again, and then...

He looked at Hitch and said, "No, reckon I better be driftin' along, Hitch. You just tell Nance—tell her—"

"I'll tell her," Hitch said gruffly.

Steve got up on the buckskin. He had a feeling, as he rode away, that eyes were watching him from the stage office, soft blue eyes that were dewy with tears.

There was no special arena for the Cardenas County Rodeo. It was simply a local contest celebrating the end of the fall roundup each year. Cattle towns of the Whetstone Valley contributed the prize money, and sent their best men to compete in the events. All the riding was done on the flats near the railroad shipping pens north of Dobe Springs.

When Steve Lacey appeared the crudely built grandstand that rimmed the railroad tracks was almost filled and the constant noisy arrival of newcomers added fresh color and life to the rapidly growing crowd. Horses and buckboards and ranch wagons stood in the thin shade of the nearby paloverde trees. Dogs barked and snarled in the ankle-deep dust. Babies squalled. Horses nickered. A south-bound train pounded by, slowing for the station.

Without feeling any rise in excitement Steve rode into the turmoil of dust and animal smell, passed along the ragged edge of the crowd, then angled across to the chutes where a knot of riders waited, gaudy in bright silk shirts and gayly colored bandannas.

The rodeo master rode forward, grinning over a scarlet neckpiece, and pushed a battered hat towards Steve. "Pick yore poison, Lacey! We been waitin' fer yuh."

Steve reached into the hat and drew out a slip of paper. He knew the name of the bronc he was to ride would be printed on it, but he didn't bother to read it. He sat the saddle a little tensely while his eyes traveled hopefully through the crowd looking for Nancy Greer. The hat went next to a lanky lean-jawed rider from the T Slash. The man read his

slip and handed it back to the rodeo boss. "I got Cricket!" he yelled. "Whoopee!"

Jack Orloff came forward on foot, spurs jingling, dark, smooth-featured face set in a confident grin. He dipped into the hat, glanced at his slip and casually handed it back to the official. His gray eyes came up challengingly to meet Steve Lacey's. "Reckon you're outta luck, Lacey," he taunted. "I got Blue Blaze. That means you're stuck with Demon."

Steve Lacey made no reply. Instead he dismounted while his eyes again desperately searched the ranks of the crowd. The rodeo master began announcing the results of the drawing. All the horses were outlaws, but judging from the murmur that swept through the throng as the name of Steve's bronc was called, Demon was the worst of the lot.

Steve glanced over to the number three chute. Demon was already saddled, and Jack Orloff and several others were standing around looking at him. A mere glance was enough to tell anybody with horse savvy that Demon was a savage man-killer. A glassy-eyed pinto, his unshod hoofs were like razor-edged simitars, and he was using all four in a furious effort to bash through the plank gate of his chute.

THE THREE competing riders drew again, this time for order of entry, and now Steve felt he was lucky. His turn would be last. That meant he'd at least know what he was up against and how long he'd have to stay in order to win. And he *had* to win! If he didn't, it wouldn't be just a bronc-busting contest he'd be losing. It would be Nancy, their future together, everything....

The T Slash puncher was first. Through his megaphone the announcer bawled: "Lay-d-e-e-e-z-e an' gents! The first rider—Tom Oldham, on Cricket!"

A roar of applause surged across the flats. "Ride 'im, Tom! Give 'im hell, boy!"

Oldham ducked into the narrow chute. Two punchers held the animal with a blindfold over its eyes. Two others sat their horses out in front, waiting to act as flankers when the

race was finished. In the saddle Oldham grunted, "Let 'er go," and the chute gate swung quickly open. The outlaw bronc burst out of it like a bullet out of a gun barrel, head down, charging with the mad rush of a tortured bull. Tom Oldham fanned him desperately, but the wild-eyed animal ran straight on and with a splintering crash drove into the fence at the far end of the field. Oldham saved himself with a trick fall; then the two flankers raced alongside and picking him out of the dust galloped back amid wild yells from the crowd.

Now the voice of the announcer boomed, "Jack Orloff—on Blue Blaze!" but only a few perfunctory cheers came from the throng as Orloff sauntered over to the number two chute and climbed gracefully over the rail. He dropped nonchalantly into the saddle and gave the word. The gate crashed open and Orloff kicked in the spurs, sending the horse forward in a tremendous leap.

Then, fluidly adapting his body to the pitching, rearing antics of the animal, he treated the crowd to one of the most stylish exhibitions of bronc riding it had ever seen. Never losing command and showing no mercy to the infuriated horse, Orloff finished his ride and dropped down from the saddle without help from the flankers, leaping nimbly away while the powerful brute still savagely bucked. Then he did something that immediately drew Steve Lacey's eye. He took off his hat and waved to somebody in the stands.

Until then Steve had been unable to locate Nancy. Now he caught a glimpse of her white Stetson and saw her smile and wave cordially back. He felt a hard, sharp stab of resentment; then his lips came grimly shut and he climbed over the barrier into the number three chute.

The spectators tensed suddenly as the announcer bellowed, "Steve Lacey—ridin' Demon," then they let out a roar of approval and fell quickly silent again. Steve swung up to the saddle, his long body vigilantly poised. The bronc was as rigid as a crouching cat. "All right," Steve drew a deep breath.

Demon vibrated as the gate swung back. Then his steel-band muscles

whipped into play and he exploded like a charge of dynamite. Nostrils flared, he burst straight into the air, cleared the chute, and in three tremendous bounds was in the center of the field, a black blur in the boiling dust.

Hammering the earth with widespread hoofs he went up in the air again, corkscrewed to right and left like a hooked sunfish, and smashed down on legs as rigid as iron rods. Steve's head snapped back, and a hot, blinding light exploded dazzlingly in front of his eyes. Then he had become the hub of a whirling, churning fury, a cyclone of spinning horseflesh and detonating hoofs.

THERE NO longer was any time, and Steve felt an insensibility now to the racking torture of those smashing, bone-jarring plunges. He went up, he came down, and he hung on, and the yells of the crowd made only a vague roar in his ears.

And then he felt it—the shifting of his weight in the kak, the sickening side-slip of his body. The saddle girth was sliding! The realization struck him with the force of a blow, almost instant with the cry of a hoarse voice shouting triumphantly from the sidelines: "He can't last now!" Jack Orloff's voice!

The sound cracked in his ears like a whiplash, flogging his beaten body to a last furious effort. He couldn't slacken now. He had to win regardless of everything. He had to win if it killed him! Head pounding, every nerve in his body vibrating like a plucked fiddle string, he ripped the horse's flanks with the spurs. Hot dust stung his nostrils as Demon dropped his ugly hammer head and launched himself in a frenzied leap. The terrific down-plunge rattled Steve's teeth, jolted him half out of the kak. Then the bronc's limber back buckled like a giant saw and abruptly snapped straight again. A rocket seemed to burst, catapulting Steve Lacey through a world suddenly turned upside down. Then he was flat on the ground, stunned, but dimly conscious that he was rolling his body, turning it over and over out of the way of those murderously slashing hoofs....

He opened his eyes, saw that the flankers had roped the saddleless Demon. And then he saw Jack Orloff. Orloff was sitting his steeldust, staring down scornfully. "Nice somersaultin', Lacey! Why don't you learn to ride?"

Steve's eyes were on the dark moist belly of the steeldust; then, suddenly, they were filled with a keen, startling brightness. He came a little unsteadily to his feet and disregarding Orloff went across to where the saddle lay, half buried in the filmy gray dust. He glanced briefly at the parted girth and saw what he had expected. The break was clean—too clean. It wasn't altogether Demon's bucking that had caused that leather to snap—the thing that had started the business was the sharp blade of a knife!

Steve walked slowly back towards the chutes, his grimy forehead thoughtfully crinkled. He was vaguely aware of the announcer bawling, "Jack Orloff—the winnah!" but the burst of applause seemed to dim away almost immediately. Then he had reached the empty chute where his buckskin was tied, and the crowd was whooping impatiently for the next event. As his foot touched the stirrup and he mounted, his eyes ranged the crowd in search of Jack Orloff, but the swaggering prize-winner seemed to have vanished. Then his glance swiveled to the section of the stands where he had last seen Nancy, but there was no white Stetson visible there now. Nancy, too, was gone. Steve Lacey's sweaty, dust-powdered face was suddenly taut as he heeled the buckskin and headed out from the flats towards Main Street.

At the Antelope Stage Office the curtains were down and the door padlocked. Then he remembered. Hitch, of course, must have startled his thirty-mile run out to the mine, must have left soon after the train had come in. His glance shuttled to the opposite side of the street where the Golden Glow was still open for business, although present opportunities for it seemed so slim that Ed Catlin, the bartender, lolled on the awninged step outside the batwings, idly rolling a cigarette.

Steve called, "Hey, Ed! Seen anything of Hitch McNeal?"

"Why sure, Steve," the bartender called back. "He must'a left fifteen—twenty minutes ago, headin' out fur Lodeville."

Steve Lacey had heard all he needed to hear. Abruptly he turned the buckskin and put it into a dead gallop.

IT WAS in the high hills east of the desert, where the trail dipped coolly into a shallow canyon, that Steve overtook Hitch McNeal. The old stage driver was pulled up beside a tiny roadside spring watering the horses, but at a sudden nicker from Steve's buckskin, approaching softly through the silencing sand, he abruptly threw down his pail and reached wildly for his rifle.

Steve grinned. "Don't shoot," he said. "I surrender."

A bit sheepishly the old man lowered the rifle. "By grab," he grumbled, "you give me a helluva start, Steve. Thought you'd still be tarryhootin' around over t' the rodeo."

"I left early," Steve said.

"Well, grab yuh a holt and git up on the box. Might's well make yoreself useful, now yo're here."

The apparent indifference in the oldtimer's voice, Steve knew, veiled a relief he preferred not to show. The thought came to him, as he wound the buckskin's reins around the saddle horn, that he was free now to do as he pleased, but that what he did no longer made much difference. Without that prize money he'd counted on so confidently, he'd lose his spread; and with it would go all those golden dreams he'd had about Nancy Greer and himself.

He felt a dull hopelessness reaching out in him as he slid down from the buckskin and clambered up to the box of the yellowly varnished stage. Hitch McNeal followed, then, handing him the rifle, picked up the reins. Hitch's long whip cracked and the body of the old Concord rocked suddenly on the leather straps that served for springs.

Ahead lay a long gradual upgrade sprinkled with low-lying clumps of mescal and Spanish bayonet. To the west, the lowering sun had exploded its crimson bombshell above the rim

of the Jugheads and was staining the peaks with the bloody spatter.

Steve looked back and whistled to the buckskin; then, seeing it was following, he straightened around and asked: "Got any passengers?"

Hitch nodded, "They's one."

"Howcome you got all the side curtains down?"

"Passenger raised a ruckus over the dust." Hitch shot Steve a glance. "How'djuh do with yore bronc-bustin'?"

Steve hesitated, staring down at the iron-ribbed express box and the sawed-off shotgun that lay between his feet. Finally he said, "Orloff won."

The noise of a rushing creek died, behind them as the stage took a sharp turn and swung towards the mountains. Suddenly silent, Hitch took out his plug of eating tobacco and bit off a juicy fragment. His jaws began working as his blue eyes squinting noncommittally to the trail ahead. Steve looked back again to make sure the buckskin was keeping up.

Two miles farther on they came to another canyon, the floor of which rose sharply towards a distant red butte. Here a wilderness of gray boulders shouldered the trail and ahead jutted the slender spire of Needle Rock, its granite tip pointed up redly through the shadows into the glow of the smoldering sun.

Steve put down his rifle now and picked up the shotgun, laying it carefully across his knees. He glanced quickly at Hitch McNeal. This was the spot where last month's holdup had taken place and old Pop Greer had been shot. Fatally, unless—

Hitch was leaning a little forward now, his mouth clamped rigidly shut as he tightened his hold on the ribbons. Then suddenly his right arm drew back and at the crack of the whip the horses' heads went down and their damp flanks abruptly tautened. Hoofs clattering in the loose shale, they pounded across a dry brook bed and the jouncing Concord lurched clear of the grade and hit level ground once more.

HITCH McNEAL opened his mouth to chew—and left it open.

Steve's eyes were on the boulder and he saw the flame spurt raggedly out from it. The shot beat up a wild thunder between the high walls of the gorge and at the same instant the lead horse on the boulder side stumbled and crashed in a ruin of broken harness. Steve's gun swiveled in vain as he looked helplessly about for some sign of a target.

Another shot slammed, and then Hitch McNeal had his foot on the brake pedal and had brought the big Concord to a grinding halt. The slug from the second shot chunked soddenly into the seat between Steve's legs as a harsh voice called, "Reach 'em high, you hombres!"

There was no apparent alternative. Both Steve and Hitch were aware that if a third shot came, it would be lethally directed. Steve raised his arms and simultaneously *H i t c h* dropped the reins and reluctantly followed suit. The voice pressed, "Now stand up and throw your guns out!"

Steve heaved the shotgun over the side, but he carefully threw his .44 so that it landed beside the off wheel horse. Clutching the seat guard for support, Hitch McNeal picked up the rifle and threw it down with a spiteful forcibleness. "By grab," he moaned, "if I could only 'a' seen the blasted son!"

Inflexibly the voice ordered: "All right, now the box. One of you pick it up and pitch out towards the rock. And if you like livin', don't try any tricks."

The box was heavy, but stooping to pick it up, Steve strained a bit more than was really necessary. He got it on a bent knee, allowed it to balance there a moment, started to turn....

Abruptly his left arm shot out and with a pushing thrust toppled Hitch McNeal over the side of the stage. In the same desperate instant he dropped the box and as the outlaw's third shot crashed flung himself in a wild leap to the ground.

He fell sprawling beside the off wheel horse but got quickly to his knees and with the .44 gripped in his hand dove through the tangled wreckage of harness to the cover provided by the dead lead horse. The hidden

marksman, meanwhile, had become either too wary or too confused to try another shot. The sun was gone completely now, and shadows that were like long dark fingers began slowly to throttle the last lingering vestiges of day.

Steve laid the barrel of his Colt across the rigid neck of the dead horse and carefully lined it on the side-edge of the big rock. The bullet went snarling like an angry hornet and what had appeared to be a slight bulge in the outline of the boulder abruptly disappeared. Steve's lips came grimly shut. The outlaw, he figured, must be standing in back of the rock, debating his next move. It might be a trick, of course, but the fact that he didn't attempt another shot seemed to indicate that he was afraid and that he might be preparing a get-away. The darkness was coming down swiftly now, and the shadow-fingers were flattening out into the wide mauve rectangles of dusk.

Suddenly against the stretching silence Steve Lacey whistled—three short peculiarly spaced notes. For a long moment no sound came but the nervous stomping of the stage horses; then, from immediately behind him, there was the sudden sharp clink of a horseshoe caroming off rock.

"Here, Goldie," Steve called softly, and then the buckskin was there beside him, its trim body concealed partially by the frame of the big lead horse. For a bare instant Steve remained motionless; then, abruptly tensing, he vaulted into the saddle and sent the horse lunging directly towards the boulder.

AS THE buckskin flashed around it, Steve saw a crouching figure leap suddenly into the saddle of a waiting horse, some fifteen or twenty yards ahead. At the sound of Steve's approach the rider slued around in the kak and loosed two quick shots, both too hurriedly fired to be effective. Steve pumped a rapid answering shot and drove in with spurs. The outlaw was goading his horse frantically, trying to get free of the canyon's pocket before Steve could come

up. Steve jabbed with the spurs again and suddenly the horses were even, abruptly jammed together, stirrup to stirrup.

The hand of the fugitive swung up glitteringly, but Steve's .44 was ready and he hammered it down against the outlaw's wrist with a quick chopping stroke. A yelp of pain broke from the man as he dropped the gun, and then Steve's left hand was hooked into his belt and they fell threshing to the ground as the horses took fright and swung apart.

The outlaw struggled furiously, and with a sudden convulsive twist of his body rolled over on Steve and savagely drove his knee into Steve's stomach. Steve felt the breath push up out of him, felt his body alarmingly going lax. Then anger flooded him, whipped his flagging muscles back into play. With sudden frenzied strength his arms tightened around the outlaw and he flung the man violently over on his back. At the same instant he wrenched free from the other's suddenly slackened grasp and came jerkily to his feet with the gun up in his hand. And then it came, from a wide, flat boulder just above him...the voice of Nancy Greer!

"Don't shoot, Steve," Nancy cried, "I've got him covered for you!"

Steve had no time in which to be surprised. Disheveled, mumbling curses, the outlaw was on his feet now and at sight of his face a startled cry broke from Nancy Greer.

"Why Steve, it's—it's Jack Orloff!"

"Orloff all right," grunted Steve. "You just keep that gun onto him, Nance, while I go git me a rope." He quickly bound and gagged Orloff.

Nancy came down from the rock and Steve was conscious suddenly of the warm pressure of her hand on his arm. An unwonted timidity was in her voice as she asked, "Steve, are you—are you all right?"

"Why—why sure," Steve said. "But how in the blue blazes—"

"I rode in the stagecoach, Steve. I—well, didn't I tell you I wouldn't let Hitch ride alone?"

"Hitch!" Steve's eyes abruptly widened. "Come on, I nearly furgot about the danged old walrus!"

They found the old man hunched over beside the Concord, solicitously massaging his right knee. He squinted up quizzically at Steve.

"You shore are a rough-playin' jasper," he grumbled. "Who is the feller?" he asked.

"Old friend o' yours," answered Steve. "Jack Orloff."

"By grab!" exclaimed Hitch. Then his eyes tightened on Steve accusingly. "Dang yore heathen's hide if I don't think you knowed it was him all the time!"

"Well," Steve felt suddenly embarrassed with Nancy's eyes on him, "it was just—just sort of a notion I had."

"Notion!" cackled Hitch. Then he wailed, "Great Lord a'mighty, ain't you never gonna find words fur nothin'?"

"Well," Steve reddened, "it was just Orloff was fixin' to fix me but—well, he got himself in a fix instead."

HITCH McNEAL looked as if he was about to suffer a stroke of apoplexy. Steve took a deep breath and struggled on: "Reason my bronc throwed me at the rodeo this afternoon was somebody cut my saddle

girth—Orloff, I reckon. Well, when I got throwed Orloff rode out to kinda shoot off his mouth, and I seen his boots had them diamond-shaped caulks you 'was tellin' me about, Hitch. And the steeldust's belly was scarred—like it had scraped the top of a barb' wire fence. So—well, that give me a notion—"

"By grab," interrupted Hitch excitedly, "that ain't all it'll give yuh, son! The Acuna Company's offered a ree-ward of five hundred cash money fur anybuddy ketched liftin' one o' their payrolls. By grab, I reckon it's yours, Steve!"

"Nance," Steve began, "there's somethin' I've got to tell you, but—well, what I mean to say—that is—"

"Steve Lacey," Nancy Greer cut in, "have I got to ask you myself?"

"Why—why Nance—"

Then she was up on her toes, her arms around his neck, her lips pressed warmly to his.

"There!" she exclaimed impatiently. "Now, Steve Lacey—will you marry me?"

Hitch McNeal looked hurriedly the other way. "By grab," he muttered incredulously. "Knock me over with a feather, somebuddy!" ● **END**

OLD MINING CAMP NAMES by W. K. PUTNEY

HALF A CENTURY ago one was still able to note odd mining camp names in the districts of the Rocky Mountains. Some were given by miners out of sheer fancy, some had a poetic tinge, but most grew inevitably out of some strange circumstance connected with the mine itself.

Curiously, enough, a few were named after old songs. As an illustration of the last, one was called "The Girl I Left Behind Me." Another, "Sweet Marjorie." A third, owned by a rough-bearded chap whose appearance belied anything suggestive of love or emotion, was known as "My Sweetheart."

Humor frequently entered into the naming of mines, as in "Thompson's Mule," "Sassy Jane," "Busted," "Hanner Marier," and "The Fair Dream." The word "Sassy" was found in many: "Sassy Lucy," "The Sass-Box," "Little Sass-Box," and just plain "Sassy."

Women's names were commonly used, as in "Pretty Polly Pemberton," "Missouri Belle," "Baby Belle," and "Linger Lucy."

No explanation is needed of why the following were named—"Last Chance," "Last Cent," "Lost Chance," "Last Hope."

Emotions were variously expressed in "Dandy Jim," "Daddy's Delight," "Just My Luck," "Fair Dream," "Baby Mine," and "Struck It!"

Perhaps the most commonly used, favorites with many miners, were the names "Fairy Queen" and "Morning Star." Oddities never duplicated were "Guns of the Range" and "Missouri Lead." Two that seemed to express deep satisfaction were "Here We Air" and "At Lasta Mine." While "Hello" doubtless expressed surprise at some sudden discovery, or could have been an invitation to the stranger to "set awhile." ● **END**

ONE AGAINST THE GUN-WOLVES

by KENNETH A. FOWLER

ROCKY SAUNDERS stiffened suddenly in his chair, knife and fork clamped in fingers that had the blunt leathery look of quirt ends. Then, as certainty grew

shoulders. She walked listlessly across the uneven floor of the cabin and drew back the faded dimity curtain that screened a small square window.

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The bank bandits couldn't escape the trap.

that he had actually heard it—the sharp, incisive clink of a horseshoe caroming off rock—he lunged halfway up out of the chair and snapped: “See who it is, Martha! Somebody’s ridin’ up the trail.”

There were still glimmering traces of beauty in the face of Martha Saunders, but it was a withered beauty, like that of a flower blemished prematurely by frost. Some of that frost mingled now with the rich deep jet of her hair, and there were other signs of the blight in her pallid cheeks and the lifeless sag of her

“It’s only a boy,” she called back wearily, “a boy on a horse. He—”

She broke off with a startled exclamation. “Oh, he’s fallen! Rocky! I’m afraid he’s hurt!”

The man pushed back angrily from

**King Murdock's owlhoot
horde didn't figure that a
button's brain could
match their dry-gulch
lead...**

the table and bit off an oath as he threw down his knife and fork and followed the woman out of the cabin into the rapidly deepening dusk. Already, from the canyon below, mauve shadows were blotting out the last lingering vestiges of day, and the darkening sky revealed a single pale star, like a pearl pouched in amethyst plush.

When the man came up, the woman was down on her knees beside the boy, cradling his head in her lap and stroking his temples with firm competent fingers.

"Reckon he didn't break any bones," she murmured dully, half as though speaking to herself. "But he looks kind of peaked. I wouldn't be surprised if—"

She tensed suddenly as the boy's body twitched; then he was sitting up, staring at her with wide, limpid blue eyes.

"You fell off your horse," she said inadequately.

"He knows that," the man threw in harshly. "Who are yuh, kid?"

THE BOY jumped spryly to his feet, belying any injury to his spare but hard-muscled young body, and began spanking the dust out of his blue denim jumpers. The jumpers were faded, as though they had gone through a great many washes, and his tight-fitting hickory shirt was patched unskillfully at the elbows.

He ran a freckled hand through ruffled sandy hair and exclaimed, "Whew! Don't reckon I should' a' rid so far, first day. I—I ain't et since mornin'."

"Saddle tramp," growled the man.

The woman darted an angry look at him and reached impulsively for the boy's hand. "You come right inside," she ordered, "and we'll scare up some victuals pronto. Rocky and me was just settin' to the table when we heard you ridin' up the trail."

"I don't want no kid around here," the man said sharply. "Give him a handout and let him ride on to wherever he's goin'."

The boy looked at Martha Saunders. "I wasn't goin' no place special," he confided. With boyish directness he added: "You ain't got beans, have you, ma'am? I admire them prime."

A tired smile crossed the woman's drawn face, like a wisp of reluctant sunlight. A note of rebelliousness came into her voice. "I'm going to see this boy gets fed, Rocky," she said with sudden stubbornness. "You ain't got no cause to suspicion anything of a boy. Go put up his horse."

Sputtering curses, the man lunged off in the darkness and the woman took the boy by the arm. "Maybe you'd like frijoles," she said, leading him into the sparsely furnished living room of the cabin, barren except for the table, three chairs, and a rickety looking cot. "We've got a pot of frijoles that's fresh cooked."

When Rocky Saunders came back and found the boy hunkered down at the table, dealing efficiently with a plate of oven-browned frijoles, a scowl etched itself on his bleak, thin-lipped mouth.

"Gee, ma'am, these are plumb good," the boy stated appreciatively. "I usta make 'em sometimes, but never good as this. Dad, he admired frijoles most as powerful as me, but—but now dad's gone—" The words seemed to jam suddenly in his throat, and a tear gathered slowly in his right eye and coursed briskly down his grimy cheek.

"I asked yuh before, kid," said Rocky Saunders flatly. "What's yer name?"

The boy knuckled a tight fist into the offending eye before answering, "I don't guess I heard yuh, mister. My name is James Gates, but mostly they call me just Jimmy."

The man started at the sound of the name, gray eyes narrowing. "You say Gates?" he asked sharply.

The boy nodded, his mouth full of frijoles. "Jimmy Gates," he repeated finally, swallowing. "My father—"

The woman broke in gently, "Never mind that now, Jimmy. We can talk after you've et. Rocky, go bring in the boy's things. He can stay with us tonight."

Her soft brown eyes hardened suddenly as they shuttled to meet the sullen gaze of the man. For an instant their glances locked in hostile collision, then the man's gave way. She waited until the sound of his fading footsteps had died in the outer dark-

ness, then turned to the boy and spoke in a tense, hurried voice.

"Look, Jimmy, was your father Shelby Gates—the man who—the man they—"

The boy gulped. "Yes'm. They kilt my dad yesterday, when he was drivin' the stage outta Conestoga to Pommel Mountain, totin' the payroll for the minin' company. I was settin' on the box with him, but they didn't do nothin' to me, jest said for me to git down and fog outta there, 'fore I got hurt."

HIS VOICE caught, but he went on doggedly: "I jumped down and hollered up to dad not to do nothin' till we could git a posse, but he must 'a' went for his rifle. Dad was in the Army once, and he always usta say that soldiers must fight. Anyways, I heard one o' the outlaws cussin' dad, and then—then I heard a shot and saw dad—he—he kinda crumpled, and then—"

He choked back an explosive sob as the arm of Martha Saunders reached out and stole comfortingly around his quivering shoulders. "You eat some more of them frijoles," she urged quickly. "Land sakes, son, you ain't et hardly enough to keep a good healthy flea alive!"

Jimmy grinned feebly and brushed his eyes, while Martha became unnecessarily busy tidying up the plain deal table. A kerosene oil lamp, suspended from the ceiling by a section of fence wire, threw its pale lambent flame into her eyes—eyes that were suddenly misty as she saw Jimmy determinedly return to work on the frijoles.

Gazing abstractedly at the boy, she thought of the child that might have been hers...if things had been different. And she thought how, once, she had believed that she loved Rocky Saunders. She knew now that this had been a delusion, knew that Rocky's apparent strength of character had all lain on the surface, like a false pocket of gold without root in any fundamental vein.

She used to wonder if it would have made any difference if Rocky hadn't flown off the handle and thrown up his job with old Jericho Frisbee, when Frisbee had named

Chuck Ormond foreman, instead of him. But she wondered no longer. Rocky was inherently weak, and the weak spot would have shown, sooner or later.

She had thought, for a time, that he would quit King Murdock's raiders, once his vengeance lust had been satisfied and Frisbee's prize stock had been reduced to a pitiful remnant. But he hadn't quit, despite her tearful urgent pleading...had gone on, becoming completely vicious and brutalized. Her thought at this moment was not, however, of that: she was thinking of a stage driver cold-bloodedly 'gulched while his own small son watched, in horror-stricken terror; and she was wondering if King Murdock's vicious assassins—Rocky Saunders among them—had been the ones....

She was brought abruptly out of her reverie by the sound of a heavy step at the front door. Rocky Saunders stepped into the room and stood spraddle-legged beside the table, staring surlily at the boy, then turning his cold, malevolent gaze on her.

"Bring his things in," he mimicked savagely, and angrily flung a broken-toothed pocket comb on the table. "There's one of his things, and here"—he slapped a tattered, tobacco-stained pamphlet on top of the comb—"here's the other! So help me if that ain't every blasted thing the kid's got, outside o' that busted down fly-bait he rode in on!"

He glared at the woman in sullen resentment, but it was the boy who spoke first. "Dad took most o' my things to Pommel Mountain," he explained earnestly. "We was plannin' to move there so he could do some prospectin'. He said stagin' wouldn't never make us rich, and he wanted I should have a chance—he s-s-said—"

Rocky cut in violently, "All right, all right, but quit that damned blubberin'! You're old enough now to act like a man, ain'tcha?"

"I'm thirteen," answered Jimmy soberly. He felt Martha's arm tighten around his shoulder. "But I'll be fourteen in just a couple o' months," he went on eagerly. "I'd sure admire to git work, mister, if yuh know anythin' I could do."

A strange gleam flickered momentarily in the slate-hard eyes of Rocky Saunders, like a flash of sun on gray rock.

"Maybe yuh give me an idea, kid," he muttered, and looking suddenly preoccupied he went to the table and began eating, paying no further heed to the woman but letting his eyes lift occasionally to stare speculatively at the boy.

Martha also sat watching Jimmy, while her fingers idly riffled the pages of the pamphlet Rocky had flung on the table. This boy, she considered, was the kind of son she had always imagined she would some day have, and her eyes warmed with sudden yearning as they traveled over his freckled, blunt-chinned face, with its wide, rather sensitive mouth and its eyes as blue as a patch of Nevada sky.

Surfetted now with frijoles, Jimmy had pushed back from the table and was valiantly trying to keep awake while sleep dragged at his lead-lidded eyes.

"That there," he said, pointing at the pamphlet Martha had been abstractedly leafing, "was my dad's Morse code book. Dad learnt signalin' when he was a sergeant in the Army. They done it with mirrors." After a moment he added drowsily, "I know how. Dad learnt me."

"Kid's play," Rocky Saunders spat out suddenly. Finished eating, he sat tilted back against the wall with his boot heels hooked in the rung of the chair and a loop of cigarette smoke twirling up in front of his slitted gun-metal eyes.

Martha Saunders flung him a cold glance, then looked at Jimmy.

"I think you're real smart," she said, "you should have learnt all that from this little book. Maybe you'll be goin' away some day to be an officer in the Army—like your dad."

"Maybe," murmured Jimmy complacently. "I ain't rightly decided yet, ma'am, whether to be an officer, or a cook in a restaurant. I like to cook real prime."

Martha smiled wanly. "You thought my frijoles tasted good," she said. "Maybe some day we could open a place, you and me, and be pardners."

THE BOY'S sleep-heavy eyes opened wide. "Gee," he breathed. "I'd plumb admire to do that, ma'am!"

"Well, we'll have to think about it then. But right now you'd better stretch out on that cot over in the corner, and cover yourself with that blanket. In the mornin', we'll talk some more."

"I don't guess I'm so very tired yet," yawned Jimmy. He was asleep the minute his tousled sandy head hit the pillow.

Jimmy didn't know how much later it was when he heard the voices—or imagined he heard them, like sounds vaguely wafted to the consciousness in a confused dream. One voice—the harsh one—sounded like Rocky's, while the other resembled that of the woman who had served him the frijoles. The voices were high-pitched and violent, but came to the boy thinned and tenuous, as if filtered through a thick curtain of fog.

"...I'm takin' the kid, that's all," the man said sullenly. "Murdock's been lookin' for somebody to do odd jobs around the camp."

For a moment there didn't seem to be any sound except a muffled sobbing, then the man's voice cut in again, harsh, strident.

"...I tell yuh I'll be able to quit after this next job! I'll buy that spread of old Lawson's over in the Conestoga Valley and we can settle down, like yuh always wanted. And maybe Murdock won't want the kid. How do I know—"

"I don't believe you!" the woman burst out passionately. "You promised me five years ago you were going to quit, but you're still tied to Murdock, body and soul! You're not going to sell this boy to the devil, the way you sold yourself! How do I know it wasn't Murdock's murdering gang that killed his father? How do I know you didn't do it?" A wild sob burst from her throat. "And now you want me to let you take him to this gang of cutthroats—for all I know, the gang that shot down his father in cold blood! I tell you, you can't do it, Rocky—I won't let you do it!"

The voice rose to a hysterical

scream, followed almost instantly by a jerked-out oath and the dead, smacking sound of an open palm striking flatly against resilient flesh. Then came a splintering crash, as if somebody had stumbled backward into a chair, and the voice fell away to a low, whimpering moan.

For a long time, it seemed to Jimmy, the moaning continued, fluttering against the darkness like wings. And then, suddenly, it seemed to fade away, and there was a spear of sun slanting down through the window into his eyes, and the woman who had given him the frijoles was standing above the cot, looking down at him with a sad smile on her white, drawn face.

Martha Saunders didn't seem quite the same to Jimmy, those next two days. Something seemed gone from her spirit, something that, before, had enabled her to smile, however faintly, and to hope, however vainly. Now she seemed neither to smile nor hope, and the boy sensed the defeat in the lifeless tone of her voice and the weary listlessness with which she performed her chores. The movements of her body seemed mechanical, as though, in a kind of somnambulistic daze, she was, herself, unconscious of any physical activity. She was still kind to Jimmy, but it was an abstract, impersonal kindness, like the polite and meaningless courtesy of strangers. The boy saw that her eyes were red and swollen, as though she had been weeping; there seemed to be a hurt look in them, like the mute appeal he had seen once in the eyes of a dog that had been whipped.

ROCKY on the other hand, now treated him more genially, although the geniality seemed a bit forced, Jimmy thought. He knew, intuitively, that he should trust Martha, distrust Rocky; towards her, he felt drawn by a curious magnetism he could not explain. He was unaware that this strange yearning was simply the natural desire of a parentless boy for the affection and shelter of a mother's arms; the way it seemed to him now, he didn't see what he could do to make Martha like him again,

if she didn't want to. A modicum of the soldierly stubbornness that he had inherited from his father forbade that he should push himself at anybody not even at a wonderful lady like Martha, who had treated him so fine that first night.

As for Rocky: well, underneath his gruffness, maybe Rocky was his friend, too. He had promised him a job, anyway; a man was coming to the cabin in another day or two, and then Rocky would know all about it—where it was to be, and when. Maybe he could make Martha proud of him if he could earn some money for her. He could buy her something fancy to wear, or maybe she would like some new cooking pots. Martha liked cooking, the same as he did; but he didn't guess he'd ever be able to cook frijoles with that crisp, golden-brown crust she could put on them.

It was nearing sundown of the second night when the man Rocky had been expecting came riding up the trail. . .

Jimmy, who had just finished drying the supper dishes for Martha, came out of the kitchen and went over to where she sat in front of the fireplace, staring down vacantly at the gray dead embers. Rocky had gone outside and was standing beside the man on the horse, talking.

"Martha?"

"Yes, Jimmy." She remained as she was, without moving.

"Martha, I may be goin' away to-night to see about that job Rocky promised me. I'd be plumb obliged, ma'am, if you'd take care of my dad's code book for me. I wouldn't wanta lose it. It's sort of—sort of something to remember him by."

She turned then, slowly, regarding him dully from puffed, reddened eyes. "All right." Her voice was flat. "I'll keep it for you, if you like."

He pressed it into her slack fingers and the pressure seemed to arouse her momentarily. She looked down at the book, at first blankly, then with a strange startled excitement, as if seeing it for the first time. A preternaturally intense light seemed to flare suddenly from the dark embers

of her eyes, as she reached out abruptly and seized his wrist.

"Jimmy, look!" She was squeezing his wrist with an agonizing pressure, was speaking to him vehemently in a tense, vibrant undertone. "Jimmy... You—you like me, don't you?"

"Yes'm. If—if I had a ma, I'd admire her to be jest like you, ma'am."

Something clogged in Martha Saunders' throat, muting her voice to a husky tremor. "Jimmy... Listen, Jimmy..."

She talked steadily for about five minutes and when she had finished, Jimmy said, "Yes'm, I'll do it. Unless it should be too far, or maybe I don't get a chance."

"It's not far, Jimmy... just across the canyon. I've seen their campfires lots of times."

"I'll try then, ma'am. If I can over-hear anything."

"You must keep awake! They may get drunk. Then they're liable to talk." Her voice tightened. "I'll be watching, Jimmy... watching every minute. If you can do it—"

A shadow fell across the floor.

Rocky Saunders stood bulked in the doorway, a leer gashed across the granite immobility of his face.

"Secrets?" he sneered. His voice sharpened abruptly. "Okay, kid, dust outside pronto, and get aboard the chestnut that's out there. We'll leave your fly-bait cayuse to keep Martha company."

"Yes, sir, I'm ready," responded Jimmy. "I've jest gotta say good-by—"

ROCKY'S big-knuckled fist knotted around his scanty shoulder, drove him spinning like a top out through the doorway.

"I said to get aboard that chestnut!"

Martha Saunders sprang from her chair... eyes blazing with an irrepresible fury.

"You bully!" she flared. "You cowardly boy-baiter! If you cause any harm to this boy, Rocky, I warn you now—I'll kill you!"

Rocky Saunders didn't answer. Instead he turned and slammed the door in her strained, startlingly white face.

Although the hideaway of King Murdock was on the west rim of the canyon, directly opposite the cabin of his scout-spy, Rocky Saunders, there was no way of crossing that wide, sheer-walled gorge either afoot or by horse. To get to the hideout from the Saunders' cabin it was necessary to travel south along the east ridge of the rimrock for about two miles, cross down into a patch of seried dry washes and badlands below the yawning mouth of the gorge, and then follow a narrow, tortuous up-trail for nearly three miles to the camp, situated several hundred feet back from the cliff edge in a screening nest of boulders. It was an ideal layout: high, inaccessible, and furnishing good cover, should the need for defense ever arise.

Rocky, as reconnaissance man for the outlaws, was handily situated, from his side of the canyon, to get down into the town of Conestoga and keep his ears open for scraps of information that might prove useful to Murdock, or to undertake long, mysterious journeys the real purpose of which was to scout out cattle outfits that seemed poorly equipped to withstand sudden raids. Murdock would stay holed up until Rocky brought word of a victim, then would come down off the rimrock to strike with the swift and deadly accuracy of a rattlesnake. To mask his real occupation, Rocky worked a small claim in the hills back of his cabin, but never very actively, or for very long at a time.

The rapidly darkening sky was like the hide of a sleek black stallion, pricked by a myriad of glittering star-spurs, as Rocky Saunders and the boy approached the outlaw camp, headed by Bull Hemple, the big, flat-faced outlaw with whom Rocky had talked back at the cabin earlier in the evening. At a point where the trail narrowed suddenly to a jagged cleft between two giant boulders, a hidden voice rang out in sharp command.

"It's all right, Ben," growled Bull Hemple. "I got Rocky and a kid." The little cavalcade advanced single column through the narrow defile

formed by the rock outcrop to emerge on a wide, boulder-strewn plateau lighted by the feeble flames of a small campfire. Back several feet from the fire, adjoining a shack crudely constructed of live-oak boughs, there was a substantially built stone and log hut, and at the sound of the hoofbeats two men carrying lanterns stepped out of the hut and sent exploratory beams flashing upward into the faces of the riders.

"It's us all right," grumbled Bull, sliding down bulkily from the leather and reaching up to the pocket of his shirt for the makings. "Ben ain't fallen asleep back there—yet."

"He'd better not." The voice was sharp, edged with authority, and the sound of it brought Jimmy Gates up stiff and tense in the saddle, his heart like a heavy mallet hammering against his ribs. He had heard that voice before! Four masked men had stood spraddle-legged in front of a stage coach, guns slanted up at the driver. And this was the hombre who had viciously cursed the driver, had flung up his rifle, and...

Jimmy felt as if an icicle was being pressed against the base of his spine as the man's eyes, quick, obsidian, bore down on him like the swiveling barrel of a gun. "Who's the button?" the man rapped out.

Rocky answered, "This is Jimmy, King." He winked carefully. "I told him you could fix him up with a job."

"Oh, yeah. We'll see about it tomorrow. Okay, kid, you can bed down over in the shack."

WHEN JIMMY didn't move, sat staring at King Murdock's bleak, thin-lipped mouth as if hypnotized, Rocky ripped out savagely: "Didn't vuh hear what the boss said? Get the blazes down off that hull and get to bed!"

The boy came down then and moved off slowly towards the shack. One thought tore jaggedly through his consciousness: he'd found the man who murdered his father. One name kept beating like the clapper of a giant bell inside his brain: Murdock...Murdock...Murdock...

He forced himself to muffle that angry clamor in his head, to gear his

brain for the swift dangerous work that lay before him. The inside of the shack, he saw, was without even a cracker box to squat on, but there were a pair of dirty blankets on the floor, and over in a corner a rusty lantern with a soot-smudged chimney. The fire outside had been built up and the leaping flames poured an eerie, wavering light into the shack. Groping around, Jimmy discovered a half-used packet of cigarette papers underneath the top blanket, but no matches. Why hadn't he thought of matches when he was back at the cabin with Martha? He had to have matches... But first he had to have information.

His heart still thumped raggedly against his ribs, but he felt calmer now, remembering Martha and the things she had told him he must do. He peered cautiously out through the doorless opening of the shack. Rocky, Bull Hemple, King Murdock, and the fourth man whom they called "Spanish," were sprawled out around the campfire drinking from bottles that had come out of Rocky's saddlebags. A little while later the fifth member of the gang, the man named Ben who had stood guard at the entrance to the camp, came trudging up with his rifle hooked under a gangling arm and sat down with the others.

From the shack, talk around the campfire was barely audible, and Jimmy strained forward, listening tensely. The voices droned desultorily.... For a long time—hours, it seemed to the cramped boy huddled in the doorway—the men talked garrulously but inconsequentially. Then, suddenly, King Murdock was saying: "...Be better to leave the kid here when we go down tomorrow...can't run off without a horse...this bank job...biggest thing yet...can't take a chance...can use the kid as bait on small stuff later..."

Jimmy lost the rest as Spanish got up and threw another log on the fire, but he'd heard enough, everything he needed to know. They were going to hold up the Conestoga Bank...it must be the Conestoga bank, because that was the only one in the county. And the raid was to be some time tomorrow!

Jimmy had no way of keeping

track of the time, but it seemed a long while later that King Murdock, Bull Hemple and Spanish staggered up and walked wobblingly to the cabin, while Rocky, dragging a blanket along the ground, headed uncertainly for the shack. The fifth man, Ben, wrapped in a blanket, remained hunkered down in front of the weakly flickering campfire, propped against a rock with the rifle anchored between his bony knees.

Jimmy dove back between the blankets, but Rocky didn't even glance at him when he came in. Stupefied by the whisky he had drunk, Martha's husband dropped down on his blanket and was snoring heavily almost at once.

EYES FIXED on the huddled figure beneath the blanket, Jimmy crawled on hands and knees to the corner where the lantern stood. Holding it with both hands, he shook it lightly. A faint gurgle indicated the presence of oil. As yet, however, he couldn't risk lighting it. The guard, out by the fire, had been drinking, but he appeared neither drunk nor sleepy. He sat with his back to the shack, staring down dourly into the sputtering embers. Hugging the lantern, Jimmy put a cautious foot outside the door. The guard was less than twenty feet away, but to the left a bit was a sprawling boulder, and if he could reach that...

A cloud-veiled moon bathed the rocky terrain in a nebulous half-light, so that the boy, inching cautiously away from the shack, could discern objects only faintly in the distance. But he had almost made the rock when it happened. Feeling his way tenderly across the uneven ground, his foot slipped on a slanting stone and he fell heavily, the lantern hugged protectively in his arms. Instantly the guard back at the campfire jerked to his feet, rifle swiveling in a glinting half-circle. "Who's there?" he called sharply.

Jimmy lay rigidly where he had fallen, body stiffened against the shale-sharp ground, breath coming in jerky gusts from between clamped teeth. The guard had gauged the location of the sound accurately, was walking towards it, gaunt frame tensed and alert. Jimmy watched,

without moving his head, as the man came closer and closer. Then, within scant feet of the spot where the boy lay sprawled, a flat shadow against the gray ground, the man halted, stood on stiffly braced legs peering into the gloom. "Probably just another damned wildcat," he grumbled, and swinging abruptly about, headed back for the campfire.

Jimmy sucked in a long breath. Jagged chunks of shale were cutting into his skin like knives, and his swelling right ankle was beginning to ache with a dull, persistent urgency. But he had to go on, for Martha's sake. Martha believed in him, was depending on him. He resumed his slow, painful advance, crawling on hands and knees. Reaching the shelter of the boulder he tried to stand and found he couldn't. The ankle would no longer bear his weight. He didn't know how much farther it was to the rimrock, but he knew he had to get there, even if it meant crawling the whole distance. And that, it began to appear, was what it did mean. He started forward again, the sharp shale slashing his thinly protected knees, pulling the useless leg after him like a heavy log being dragged to a campfire. The lantern was still intact, but it was a burden now, in this agonizingly slow advance across bumpy, rocky ground. He paused for a short rest at each screening boulder, then crawled wearily on, aware that unless he reached the rimrock soon, he would never reach it.

Every time the injured ankle bumped on a stone a knife-thrust of pain stabbed through his body, and at intervals of increasing frequency blinding bursts of red and green fire seemed to explode in front of his eyes. But he went writhing on, buoyed by the faith of a woman, the memory of a man.

And then, after a time that seemed endless, he saw the light winking in Martha's cabin across the gulch, and knew that all this had not been phantasmagoria, but reality, and that still another hazard remained before him. He had only one match in his pocket. ... A fairly stiff breeze was quartering up from the canyon, enough to make it awkward, trying to keep a match aflame. And suppose the wick

of the lantern needed trimming, and didn't catch at the first touch of flame? After all this, to be dependent on the whim of a spurt of flame at the end of a sliver of wood!

HE CROUCHED in the shelter of a broad, round-rimmed boulder, and lifting the lamp chimney, turned up the wick. Then, with the lantern sheltered by the boulder on one side, by his body on the other, he scratched the match.... For an instant, the flame gusted alarmingly before a puff of wind that slid down across the curving top of the rock and threatened to extinguish the light. Then, miraculously, it had caught against the oil-soaked wick, and was burning cleanly and brightly! He quickly lowered the chimney and crawled out from behind the rock. Martha's lamp made a pinpoint of light in the window of the cabin. Jimmy lifted the lantern, waved it slowly back and forth. Instantly the light in the cabin seemed to blink out, then come on again. Martha had seen his signal! She had raised and lowered her curtain to answer it!

With his hat for a shield he began to send his message across that dark yawning chasm that separated them...long and short flashes...the letters he knew by heart from that little book that had been his father's....

He was nearly finished when he heard it: a faint crashing sound from somewhere behind him, then voices. They'd discovered his absence, and were on his trail! It seemed suddenly as if all the blood was draining from his pain-wracked body, as if the rim-rock in front of him was wobbling, swaying crazily.... As he pitched forward his arm struck the lantern and it started to roll away from him, down, down, into the black nothingness of the canyon. That black nothingness was puffing up all around him now, cradling him in its softness, and his last thought before it engulfed him was that they'd never suspect now that he'd been signaling, but would merely believe that he'd been trying to escape.

King Murdock got his gun up, but it would have been better if he hadn't tried it. The shot slashed out from behind a roll-topped desk at the back of the bank, and Murdock's big body

tilted, then came driving down like a tall pine before an axman's steel. The gun jounced out of his hand as if he hit the floor and spun across the room.

Spanish Marona, who with Bull Hemple had entered the banking office just behind Murdock, started to throw a shot at the desk when Hemple shouted, "Run for it! It's a trap!" Spanish swiveled, gun up, and fired twice at a sudden flash of steel behind the grillwork of the cashier's cage. He had triggered hurriedly, however, while the grim blue muzzle of the .45 trained on him from the cage was fisted unfalteringly in the firm-fingered hand of Sheriff Monte Blake. A red lance of flame stabbed from the snout of the sheriff's gun as Spanish Marona, a twisted grimace of pain and bewilderment on his dark face, sagged to the floor clutching his stomach with both hands.

Simultaneously Bull Hemple's cutter erupted—jetting streaks of forked lightning at the desk. Two shots cracked out simultaneously—one from the desk, the other from the grilled cage—and Bull Hemple spun halfway around, then sank in a heap in the doorway, his head thrust back grotesquely against the doorjamb. A thin trickle of blood lay on his right cheek, like a red thread.

Outside there was a sudden hammering of hoofs, followed by the abrupt slam of a rifle. Instantly a second shot crashed, almost like an echo of the first. The hoofbeats slowed, then the sound of them stopped altogether.

As Sheriff Monte Blake pushed out of the cashier's cage, his tall, raw-boned deputy, "Little" Augie Smith lumbered up stiffly from behind the desk.

"Reckon them two shots was fer the rest o' the gang," drawled Little Augie. "That was a good idee o' yours, Monte, hidin' out Jake and Bill in Judge Hake's office, over the hardware store. I don't reckon them boys ever miss with a Winchester."

"That," growled long-jawed Sheriff Monte Blake, "is mebber why I put 'em there. Come on."

A CROWD was milling around two motionless figures that lay flattened in the churned-up dust of the

street—one of them Ben Schute, the outlaw's lookout, the other Rocky Saunders. The bodies were sprawled out perhaps ten yards apart, Schute with his face in the dust, Rocky Saunders staring up sightlessly at the westering sun.

"Come on, let's git across to the office," suggested the sheriff. "Ain't nothin' more to be done here, except a little undertakin', mebbe."

At the door to his office the gaunt lawman was confronted by Martha Saunders, who stood there white-faced, taut with anxiety. Her slight body trembled with eagerness, there was an anxious commingling of hope and fear in her voice as she asked: "Oh, Sheriff! Was Jimmy safe? Did your men find the camp all right? Is —are all those others—dead?"

A grim smile played over the sheriff's grizzled countenance. "Ma'am," he growled, "I'm plumb pleased to state that the answer to every one o' them questions is yes. And now, ma'am, if you'll just step into my office for a minute—"

Jimmy, swathed in a gray blanket, sat propped in the sheriff's big desk chair, his right foot braced against an opened drawer of the desk, a grin crinkling the dead whiteness of his face.

"Hi, Martha!" he cried.

"Jimmy!" She had her arms around

him, was brushing back his rumpled sandy hair with soft, caressing fingers. "Jimmy, are you all right? They didn't hurt you, did they? When your light went out so suddenly I didn't know—I was afraid—"

"Shucks, I'm all right, ma'am. They jest tied me up, was all, and said I'd git a hidin' when they come back. But I don't reckon they're comin' back, are they, ma'am?"

"No, Jimmy. I—I don't reckon they are."

"Ma'am! Guess what?"

"What, Jimmy?"

"There was five thousand dollars reward on them galoots, and Sheriff Blake says you and me gits it! He says if it wasn't for my signalin' you they was gonna rob the bank, and you ridin' into town to warn him like you did, they might never have got a one of 'em. Martha, could we be pardners now like you said once—could we maybe open us up a restaurant with that reward money?"

Her arms tightened around his thin shoulders. "We can do more than that, Jimmy. How would you like me to adopt you? Do you think you'd like me for a mother, Jimmy—as well as a partner?"

"Gee, ma'am, I plumb do. Martha, lookit! Lookit these swell crutches Mr. Smith made for me till my sprained ankle gits better!" ● END

"FOLLOW THE CACTI!" by W. K. PUTNEY

WHEN THE telephone was first introduced into New Mexico and Arizona, a very serious problem was faced. The country did not have any trees that would provide telephone poles. So what to do? An almost prohibitive cost would be entailed bringing poles to the region, but telephones must be set up. History does not give information as to who thought of this ingenious idea but, to string wires, the men were ordered to use cactus plants. "Follow the cacti" became their watchword.

Mules brought the wire along. The lines were not only crooked but sometimes curved around crazily. Cactus plants did not grow as the workers might wish. But there had to be supports for the wires and so the weird lines went up. At first it was planned

to use the cactus plants as poles only on a temporary basis but, strange as it may seem, they proved far better than ordinary telephone poles. Cactus is not affected by mites or insects, it bends to the wind, and cannot be uprooted by the fiercest hurricane. And it was not dried out by extreme heat. Altogether the cactus proved a wonderful substitute for the wood pole.

The only difficulty was that cactus seemed to attract lightning and the cactus telephone poles were frequently shattered by a bolt of lightning. But even that was of little moment, for there were plenty of cacti around, and all the lineman had to do was to move his wires a few yards and once more set them in place.

● END



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